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ARTHUR OCHS SULZBERGER JR., *Publisher*

Cleaning Up Connecticut

This election season, Connecticut may finally erase the taint of political corruption it acquired after scandals sent two mayors, a former governor and a state senator to prison. Public disgust led to a law establishing a voluntary public campaign financing system for state officeholders. This is the first full year of the new system, and participation is excellent: only 10 of 225 candidates have indicated that they will not use taxpayer money.

The rest of the country will be watching to see how well the system works. Though not perfect, it's a great improvement over the status quo: Public financing has invigorated democracy in New York City and states like Arizona and Maine.

In Connecticut, candidates must first obtain a minimum number of \$5 donations in private money from district voters before qualifying for public money. They must also agree to limit spending, and they may not accept donations from state contractors or lobbyists. To keep the playing field level, larger grants are available to candidates whose opponents refuse public financing.

It remains to be seen whether public financing will lead to more contested races for the State Legislature. For years, as many as one-fourth of the races have been uncontested. But if Maine's experience is any guide, Connecticut may see a dramatic rise in competition.

Maine adopted public financing in 2000. In the preceding decade, about one in five races for seats in the State Legislature offered voters one candidate. In the 2004 and 2006 elections, by contrast, just one in 25 races was uncontested. In a recent study, the great majority of first-time candidates in Maine said that public financing of campaigns was an important factor in their decision to run. There also was an 18 percent increase in the number of women running for office.

Public financing encourages good governance as well as competition. Government is cleaner when lawmakers are not beholden to special interests and are free to spend their energy meeting the needs of the people who matter — those who elected them.

Connecticut, which became known as "Corrupticut" after the recent scandals, can only benefit from this new system.