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**OUR TOWNS**

## **Connecticut Hopefuls Flock to Public Financing**

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CANTON, Conn.

Chances are there aren't a lot of State Senate debates that end with one candidate's citing Elliot L. Richardson's two rules for deciding how to cast your vote. (Does a candidate have a good sense of history? To what extent does the candidate appreciate the consequences of his or her decisions?)

Of course, there can't be many debates that cite Mr. Richardson at all. But one reason this one did was that one of the candidates, Art House, actually served on a board with Mr. Richardson, the former attorney general, and brings to a modest State Senate race experience that includes public affairs positions with four major corporations, work on the [National Security Council](#) and high-level jobs with a former [Connecticut](#) senator, Abraham A. Ribicoff, and a current one, [Christopher J. Dodd](#).

Mr. House, 66, a Democrat, is in a tight race with State Representative Kevin D. Witkos, 44, a police sergeant and three-time Republican state representative, for the open seat in the Eighth Senate District in northwest Connecticut. But they're both players in an enterprising experiment in the public financing of campaigns that has made the process much more interesting than the individual races.

"Would I have run if we didn't have public financing? I don't know — maybe yes, maybe no," Mr. House said. "But I can certainly say public financing was definitely an inducement for me to take the plunge. You begin knowing that politics doesn't have to be a money game where you spend all your time on the phone dialing for dollars instead of meeting people, talking about issues and campaigning."

The big story about public financing of campaigns nationally has been [Barack Obama's](#) decision to opt out of the national system. But what's unfolding in Connecticut may end up being far more influential.

At a time when roughly half the states are seriously considering public financing of campaigns, Connecticut's initial experience has exceeded the expectations of even its most enthusiastic supporters. Of the 343 candidates running in [General Assembly](#) elections, 258 — about 75 percent — are seeking public financing.

"I think that for many reasons, Connecticut has made history this election season," said Beth A. Rotman, Connecticut's director of public financing. "We've had an unprecedented participation rate for the first elections with voluntary public campaign finance, and we've virtually eliminated special-interest money from the elections."

Connecticut's experiment with campaign finance reform happened only when it hit bottom. After the resignation of Gov. [John G. Rowland](#) in 2004 and a spate of other public corruption cases, with the state's image moving from "the Land of Steady Habits" to "Corrupticut," public financing suddenly became something other than a pet topic for good-government types.

A 2005 Zogby poll showed that 76 percent favored the public finance bill in the legislature and 82 percent backed measures to limit the influence of money on politics. That year, Connecticut became the third state, joining Maine and Arizona, with full public financing of statewide elections.

Under Connecticut's new law, candidates for the House and Senate must first raise threshold levels — \$5,000 for the House and \$15,000 for the Senate in small contributions of \$5 to \$100, excluding firms doing business with the state. If they reach that, they then get an additional \$85,000 for a Senate race and \$25,000 for a House race. They can get more if their opponent decides not to accept public financing. Money comes from the sale of unclaimed and abandoned assets in the state's possession.

For challengers, the appeal is obvious. Suddenly, they can have resources equal to an incumbent's without hitting up major donors.

Incumbents have mostly gone along either because it looks bad not to or because, like challengers, they'd rather be campaigning than raising money.

Representative Witkos, whose three terms give him some of the traditional advantages of an incumbent, voted against the public finance bill. It had more support from Democrats than from Republicans, but was signed into law by Gov. [M. Jodi Rell](#), a Republican.

Mr. Witkos figures that if voters did not support him, their money should not go to his campaign. That said, he likes the fact that the current system allows candidates to spend more time meeting with voters and discussing issues rather than raising money. He wants to see how the election cycle plays out statewide before deciding what he thinks of the new system.

“If all the incumbents get re-elected, we’re spending a lot of money and getting the same result,” he said.

Karen Hobert Flynn, vice president for state operations for [Common Cause](#), a nonpartisan citizens’ lobby that supported the new law, said there would be many ways to evaluate it beyond whether incumbents are re-elected. Did it bring new people into the races? Does the behavior of elected officials change when they’re not beholden to those who paid for their campaigns? Are there more contested races?

But the candidates, like Chris Coutu, a 32-year-old financial adviser and one-term alderman from Norwich taking on a 14-year incumbent in the race for state representative there, says the process has already created a more level playing field.

“It lets the candidates focus on the issues,” said Mr. Coutu, a Republican. “In the past, you’d be out begging for money in the final days. Chances are, if you were close, an incumbent could get out multiple mailers in the homestretch and pound home his message while you had run dry. Now you’ve both got your money, and you can focus on the issues and the voters instead of being out begging for money.”

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