Taxpayer funding energizes primaries

More than 70 percent of this year’s candidates for state office are taking advantage of Clean Election Act money.

By PAUL CARRIER
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — Cathy Martin, a Republican legislative candidate from Caribou, doesn’t think of herself as a poster child for the state’s Clean Election Act, but she doesn’t object to the title either.

That’s because Martin would not be running for the state Senate if she had to rely on private funds. “I would not have been able to get financial support,” said Martin, who is challenging Democratic Sen. John Martin of Eagle Lake.

Thanks to Martin and others like her, more than 70 percent of this year’s crop of primary candidates are publicly funded — the highest number to date — including the two Martins, who are running in Senate District 35. Public financing has become so popular that the number of people vying for seats in the Legislature is on the rise for the third primary season in a row. On June 8, primary voters will face the largest number of contested legislative races in eight years.

ON THE RISE

After dropping for years, the number of legislative candidates in Maine primaries has been rising since public financing for political campaigns kicked off in 2000:

- June 1992: 422
- June 1994: 419
- June 1996: 405
- June 1998: 358
- June 2000: 374
- June 2002: 402
- June 2004: 429
There are more party candidates running for the Senate and the House next month – 429 – than in any primary in more than a decade, according to an analysis of election statistics by the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram going as far back as 1992. And that means the number of contested primaries – races in which Democrats, Republicans or Green Independents are facing off against members of their own party – is on the rise, too.

The Democrats have seven contested Senate primaries and 12 contested House primaries. For the Republicans, the numbers are three in the Senate and 13 in the House. Even the Green Independents have a contested primary, with two Green candidates facing off in House District 120 in Portland. That’s the

Please see PRIMARY
Back page this section
FINANCING FRENZY

The popularity of public financing has surged among primary candidates for the Legislature since its introduction four years ago.

2000: 31 percent of primary candidates are publicly financed
2002: 50 percent
2004: 71 percent

The rules of the game determine how people play the game, said Oliver Woshinsky, a political scientist who taught at the University of Southern Maine for many years. "If it's easier to get in and run a serious campaign, you're going to get more people doing it."

Trend started in 2000

The heightened interest in the Legislature comes four years after legislative candidates first became eligible for public financing of their campaigns, and it's clear there is a direct link between the two developments. After dropping in every primary election from 1992 through 1996, the number of legislative candidates finally began to rise in 2000, the same year public financing kicked in.

Even more candidates jumped in 2002, as public financing became more popular. And still more candidates entered the fray this year, with the vast majority of them now relying in public financing. Only 31 percent of primary candidates used government funding to pay for their campaigns back in 2000, but that figure hit 90 percent in 2002 and 71 percent this year.

But another way, only 8 percent of the Senate districts and only 9 percent of the House districts have no publicly funded primary candidate. And in many districts, most or even all of the candidates are relying on tax dollars. In House District 37 in the Castine area, for example, both the Democrats and the Republican and the Green Independent on the June ballot are all publicly financed. "Our democracy always works best when people have a choice, and the more choices, the better," said outgoing House Speaker Patrick Colwell, D-Gardiner, who is running for the Senate as a publicly financed candidate. Colwell has no Democratic challenger to beat off June 8, but his GOP opponent in November, Douglas Newman of Hallowell, is also publicly financed.

Preliminary estimates prepared by the state's Conflict of Interest and Election Practice unit indicate that the Clean Election Act cost the general election campaign $450,000, followed by $2 million to $3 million more in additional payments to the surviving candidates during the primary. The cost of the public campaign is $1.374 million in a contested House primary, $1.371 million in untested Senate primary and $6.487 million in contested Senate primary. The winners June 8 will then get more money for their general election campaigns. "There's a number of people who could not afford to have run had it not been for the Clean Election Act," said Republican Robert Haggert of Biddeford, a publicly funded House candidate.

But even Haggert and other candidates who could run without dollar arguments that the Clean Election Act has made the process more appealing to them. They say it shifts the focus away from raising money, avoids post-election face-offs with contributors who want favors and gives candidates more credibility than they would have with less cash.

Woshinsky, who is a nationally funded candidate, conceded Democrat Richard Rhames of Biddeford, a farmer who is a publicly funded House candidate. "Whether I could run and a so-called credible campaign without it, that's another thing," he said, because "my pocket is not that deep."

With $1.374 million in state money in his contest bid for the Democratic nomination, Rhames said he's better off than he would be relying on party contributions and his own limited resources, because now he can wage "a low-budget campaign instead of a micro-budget campaign."