

Taxpayer funding energizes primaries

PAGE ONE

Me Citizens

● 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

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

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 sea-

son in a row. On June 8, primary voters will face the largest number of contested legislative races in eight years.

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*

PRIMARY

Continued from Page 1A

largest number of head-to-head party fights since 1996.

While some publicly funded candidates say they would have run without government money, others say it was the Clean Election Act that propelled them into politics. Either way, candidates say public financing convinced them to run or at least made it easier, and more satisfying, for them to do so.

"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 1998, the number of legislative candidates finally began to rise in 2000, the same year public financing kicked in.

Even more candidates jumped in 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 on public financing. Only 31 percent of primary candidates used government funding to pay for their campaigns back in 2000, but that figure hit 50 percent in 2000 and 71 percent this year.

Put another way, only 8 percent of the Senate districts and only 9 percent of the House districts have no publicly funded primary candidate on

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 ballot next month. 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, the three Democrats, two Republicans and lone Green Independent on the June 8 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 fend off June 8, but his GOP opponent in November, Douglas Newman of Hallowell, is also publicly financed.

Preliminary estimates prepared by the state Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices, which administers the Clean Election Act, peg costs for this year's publicly funded primary campaigns at about \$450,000, followed by \$2 million to \$3 million more in additional payments to the surviving candidates during the post-primary general election campaign.

Under the Clean Election Act, candidates get a fixed amount of money up front, plus up to twice that in matching funds if more money is needed to keep pace with an opponent.

The initial outlays for the June campaign are \$456 in an uncontested

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**Oliver Woshinsky, political scientist,
on the impact of Maine's Clean Election Act**

House primary, \$1,374 in a contested House primary, \$1,514 in an uncontested Senate primary and \$6,487 in a 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 Haggett of Biddeford, a publicly funded House candidate.

But even Haggett and other candidates who could run without tax dollars argue 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.

"I could run" as a privately funded candidate, conceded Democrat Richard Rhames of Biddeford, a farmer who is a publicly funded House candidate. "Whether I could run a so-called credible campaign (privately) is another thing," he said, because "my pocket is not that deep."

With \$1,374 in state money in his contested bid for the Democratic nomination, Rhames said he's better off than he would be relying on paltry contributions and his own limited resources, because now he can wage "a low-budget campaign instead of a micro-budget campaign."

"I'd like to go into the Legislature not being beholden to anybody" except the voters, said Timothy Driscoll of Westbrook, a publicly financed House candidate. "It's all about getting out door to door," Driscoll said, and knowing you don't have to raise money "gives you more time to do that."

"It allows you to campaign much harder," Haggett said. And publicly financed candidates are "on the same playing field" as their opponents, said Deborah Frank of Westbrook, a publicly funded GOP candidate for the House.

'People less wary of you'

"I think it makes people less wary of you" if they know you aren't asking them for money, said Jane Eberle of South Portland, a taxpayer-funded candidate who is taking on Republican Rep. Louis Maietta of South Portland. Even some candidates who don't like hitting up taxpayers to pay for political campaigns have signed on anyway.

"Perhaps we could put that (money) to better use than allowing politicians to buy 1,000 yard signs and newspaper ads," but as long as public financing is an option it makes sense to use it, said Republican Stedman Seavey of Kennebunkport, Haggett's opponent for the GOP nod in House District 137.

Not everyone agrees that the Clean Election Act is a good thing, or that it is fully responsible for the increasing number of candidates.

Alan Casavant of Biddeford, who is going up against Rhames for the Democratic nod in House District 137, refuses to take state money for his race. He says the state is strapped for cash, taxpayers should not have to subsidize political campaigns and the Clean Election Act makes it easier for fringe candidates to get on the ballot.

Some candidates argue that more aggressive recruiting by the political parties and hot-button issues like high property taxes help explain the proliferation of legislative candidates this year. Still, many say it is no coincidence that the number of candidates began to pick up when the Clean Election Act took effect and continued to grow as public funding became more popular.

"This is a case where it looks like (public financing) had the effect of getting more candidates into the race and probably making them more competitive" as well, Woshinsky said.

"It does provide for more people to be able to run, because new people are less able to raise funds" if they rely on private contributions, said John Martin, the state senator, who is now using public financing for the second time in his long political career.

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