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Editorial

Lesson From 'Corrupticut'

Our View: Ruling Against Campaign Finance Reform Should Not Deter Maryland

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Efforts to reduce the influence of big-money special interests in state elections suffered a setback late last week with the decision of a federal judge to throw out Connecticut's landmark campaign finance law on the grounds it put third-party candidates at a disadvantage.

The ruling has significant implications for Maryland, where legislators have been seriously considering a similar approach to publicly financed state-level political campaigns for the past five years. The proposal has won support in the House of Delegates and has gotten as far as the floor of the Maryland Senate - until a procedural move late in this year's legislative session forced it back into committee.

The concept is fairly simple: People running for House or Senate seats, incumbents and newcomers alike, would have the option of public financing. To qualify, they'd have to first raise a minimum amount of money through small donations from a minimum number of people living in their districts.

What U.S. District Judge Stefan R. Underhill found most troubling, however, was a provision in the Connecticut law that set tougher fundraising standards for candidates from minor political parties, such as the Green Party, than for Republicans and Democrats.

The ruling is a bit of a puzzle to campaign finance reform advocates since publicly financing clearly makes it easier for nontraditional candidates to win office. The good news is this approach to third party candidates is unique to Connecticut and is not the standard used in Maine and Arizona, the two other states that have adopted public financing.

The bottom line is that nothing in Judge Underhill's opinion should deter the Maryland General Assembly from moving forward with reforms next year. Under the Maryland proposal, a candidate of any party must receive nearly 400 small donations from individuals living in his or her district to qualify for public money - that's enough of a deterrent to sort out the odd kook or gadfly.

The bigger challenge is funding the program. Lawmakers will likely be reluctant to tap taxpayer dollars of most any variety at a time when the state budget faces a potential \$1 billion-plus shortfall.

But the opportunity to reduce the influence of special-interest money in the election process may be the best bargain taxpayers will ever see. How many wasteful programs, bloated contracts or other costly excesses are tied to major campaign donors?

What Maryland doesn't need is a major political scandal to force lawmakers to embrace reform. Yet the ongoing federal investigation into Sen. Ulysses Currie, chairman of the Senate Budget & Taxation Committee, and his close ties to a Prince George's County supermarket chain, could result in just that.

The compromise presented last spring - a limited pilot program for the 2014 election - would provide a reasonable start. Even Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller - the patron saint of Maryland campaign fundraising - endorsed the proposal, leaving other lawmakers little excuse not to. Legislators need to approve the measure early next year or risk the wrath of disillusioned Maryland voters who tire of money-driven politics-as-usual.