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Opinion

OUR VIEW: Campaign spending reform has its place

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Federal Judge Stefan Underhill has declared unconstitutional sweeping campaign reforms passed in 2005 in response to corruption scandals involving former Gov. John Rowland and other top officials. In effect, he has thrown out a law that many consider a model for the entire country, a bill that banned political action committee, lobbyist and contractor funds from state campaigns, with the goal of reducing the role of special interests in state elections. Moreover, it put spending limits on participating campaigns.

But, says Judge Underhill, it also gives an unfair advantage to members of the major parties.

He said that a part of the law that provides a voluntary public financing scheme for candidates for statewide offices and state lawmakers puts an unconstitutional burden on minor party candidates' First Amendment right to political opportunity, The Associated Press reported.

Specifically, he says the program, known as the Citizens Election Program, enhances major party candidates' strength beyond their past ability to raise contributions.

Under the law, candidates can receive \$25,000 for a state House race and \$85,000 for a state Senate race if they raise a certain number of contributions in \$100 or lower increments from individuals. But minor party and petitioning candidates must satisfy additional requirements, including having to obtain signatures or having received a certain percentage of votes in the last general election.

Underhill said the qualifying criteria for minor party candidates to get public funding are so difficult to achieve that most never become eligible for public funding at even reduced levels.

His ruling, which Attorney General Richard Blumenthal has already said he will appeal, comes in response to suits by the Green, Libertarian and other parties.

Certainly, minor parties have played an important role in our state. Some minority party candidates offer new ideas and a refreshing change in leadership as compared to the entrenched partisanship of the major parties; they deserve an equal chance to participate in the political process.

At the same time, the overall benefits of this law are so substantial that we all suffer from this ruling. The major provisions of this law must be preserved and we applaud the attorney general's request for a stay that would give the Legislature time to amend its stance on minority candidates.

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