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S.F. supervisor races to test public financing
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The November election showdown between San Francisco's moderate and far-left political factions for control of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors will also be a test of public financing of local elections.

Choosing between using a mix of private and public funds or instead relying only on private donations is an important decision for candidates. Deciding not to accept public financing allows a candidate to raise money unencumbered by stricter reporting requirements and limits, though it could raise the ire of voters concerned about the influence of big money on elected leaders...

The district where this distinction will be most evident is likely to be District Three... There, three major candidates have opted for private fundraising, and two of them - Denise McCarthy and Claudine Cheng - already have raised more than \$100,000 each...

Three other strong candidates in that district - Lynn Jefferson, Tony Gantner and David Chiu - are relying on the city's public-financing program. While that decision comes with limitations on fundraising, Chiu said he sees it as an advantage.

"The decision made by several candidate colleagues to reject the spending cap likely means that I will be spending more time interacting with voters while they will spend more time raising money," said Chiu, who has also raised more than \$100,000. "I don't know if voters will look on that favorably."

Under the city-financing system, candidates can receive taxpayer money for their campaign after raising \$5,000 in small contributions from at least 75 city residents. After that, candidates get matching funds based on how much they raise.

The Board of Supervisors increased the fundraising cap from \$86,000 last year and also increased the amount of public funds available to each candidate by \$40,000...

Rob Arnow, a proponent of publicly financed campaigns who pushed city leaders for the increase in public financing, said the limits need to be continually evaluated...

The objective of public campaign financing in San Francisco is twofold, said John St. Croix, executive director of the city's Ethics Commission...

"Candidates who are not busy raising money have more time to connect with voters. Additionally, candidates who receive less private contributions are less likely to be beholden to their contributors," said St. Croix, adding that it also levels the field for lesser-known candidates.

He said the average candidate over the past few years has raised and spent approximately \$100,000.

In Districts One, Nine and 11, which also will be fiercely contested, all the candidates have opted for public financing...

The District Four race between Sunset District incumbent Carmen Chu and challenger Ron Dudum is another public-financing versus private-financing contest. Chu has opted not to use public funds and has raised at least \$130,000, while Dudum has opted for the public system.

Dudum said he thinks \$140,000 will be sufficient to run his campaign, though he holds out some concern for attacks by independent expenditure committees.

"The only time obscene amounts of money make a difference is when interests decide they want to slander somebody," Dudum said...

"How much is being spent shows how important it is for ... vested interests to get their people in positions of power at City Hall," said Arnow, campaign coordinator of San Franciscans for Voter Owned Elections.

He said the group is circulating a "candidate pledge" among those running for supervisor that, among other things, commits them to supporting expansion of the city's public-financing system to eliminate nearly all private fundraising for those who choose to use public funds. Under his proposal, instead of matching funds after the initial \$5,000 raised, candidates would receive a lump payment and do no more fundraising.

Forty-two candidates have qualified to run for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. To see candidates who have stated their intention to participate in the public finance program, go to links.sfgate.com/ZEPY.