

SB 65 - Election Law – Campaign Finance – Explorat

Uploaded by: Morgan Drayton

Position: FAV

January 21, 2026

Testimony on SB 65
Election Law – Campaign Finance – Exploratory Committees
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of SB 65, which would apply certain existing campaign finance requirements and prohibitions to exploratory committees.

Maryland has a well-developed system of campaign finance law, a system that ensures everyday citizens are able trace who is making donations and what special interest voices are being heard within the election process. Given the amount of money that can be spent testing the feasibility of an individual’s candidacy, we strongly believe that exploratory committees should be required to adhere to the same level of scrutiny - it is critical that citizens be able to see who is funding these efforts.

This legislation will allow for greater disclosure and transparency around these committees, giving the public the opportunity to see who is spending time and money to influence our elections. For these reasons, we request a favorable report on SB 65.

LK_1-21 SB65 Campaign Finance - Exploratory Commit

Uploaded by: Nikki Tyree

Position: FAV



**TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
COMMITTEE**

SB 65 Election Law - Campaign Finance - Exploratory Committees

POSITION: Support

BY: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: January 21, 2026

The League of Women Voters supports campaign finance regulations that enhance political equality for all citizens, ensure transparency, protect representative democracy from distortion by undisclosed contributions, and combat corruption.

Exploratory committees have been exempted from the accountability and transparency expectations that other campaign finance committees must follow. This bill would establish reporting requirements and prohibitions for exploratory committees. It also defines essential safeguards such as regulations for the receipt of funds, permissible expenditures, and disbursement of funds and assets once a committee disbands.

Transparent elections are paramount to safeguarding our elections. This bill would bring more transparency to voters and the money that goes into campaigns. By allowing voters to know how campaigns are being financed, they can also hold candidates accountable. Candidates should be held responsible for any monies they acquire in their bid for office, whether that is through their official campaigns or by forming exploratory committees.

We urge a favorable report on SB 65.

Sen. Kagan SB65_ Exploratory Committees.pdf

Uploaded by: Sen. Cheryl Kagan

Position: FAV

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Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
Joint Committee on Federal Relations

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony SB65: Exploratory Committees

Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee
Wednesday, January 21, 2026, 11 AM

Exploratory Committees operate with virtually no statutory oversight. An [Campaign Exploratory Committee](#) is “an entity established by a prospective candidate for a public office to determine the potential candidate’s viability.” Despite functioning as early-stage campaign organizations, they are **exempt from Maryland’s campaign finance disclosure laws**. Marylanders deserve to know who is funding individuals who are testing the waters for public office, and they deserve confidence that these funds are used solely for legitimate campaign purposes.

[Current law](#) provides **no clear guardrails**. In 2022, the State Board of Elections issued [regulations](#) based on an Attorney General’s opinion; those regulations **could not mandate compliance** with our campaign finance transparency and reporting laws. As a result, Exploratory Committees raise and spend money with minimal public visibility or limits.

SB65 corrects this gap with a simple, bipartisan, and long-overdue solution. It is identical to SB17, we have a bill that passed the Senate **unanimously in 2023, 2024, and 2025**-- demonstrating a clear consensus that transparency and accountability should extend to every type of campaign committee.

SB65 establishes three essential safeguards:

- **Disclosure:** Exploratory Committees must follow the same transparency and reporting rules as other campaign committees, allowing Marylanders to see who is contributing and how funds are being spent.
- **Limited Purpose Expenditures:** Funds may only be used for activities related to determining viability.
- **Orderly Dissolution:** Once a potential candidate decides whether to run, any remaining funds must be returned appropriately-- either to contributors, a political party committee, a nonprofit, an authorized campaign, or the Fair Campaign Financing Fund.

Exploratory Committees would be permitted to spend funds only on:

- Conducting surveys or polls
- Establishing a website
- Purchasing basic electronic equipment such as computers and phones
- Employing staff
- Renting or leasing office space

- Direct mailings or communications to potential voters
- Paid digital communications

These guardrails are **reasonable and narrowly tailored**. The bill does **not** eliminate Exploratory Committees, nor does it impose contribution limits-- consistent with relevant judicial decisions. It simply ensures that Exploratory Committees operate transparently and for their intended purpose.

Both Democratic and Republican candidates have used Exploratory Committees, including Michael Steele (R), Tom Hucker (D), Neil Parrott (R), Jill Carter (D), and Tim Adams (D). Disclosure should not be partisan, and SB65 reflects that shared value.

By closing loopholes, clarifying expectations, and reinforcing public accountability, SB65 strengthens the integrity of Maryland's campaign finance system and enhances voters' trust.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB65 again this session.

2026 SB0065 Testimony against 2026-01-19.pdf

Uploaded by: Alan Lang

Position: UNF

Testimony Against SB0065

Honorable Senators

Although I agree with most of the proposed Section 13-107, I disagree with one section so much that I recommend an unfavorable report rather than recommending a Favorable report with amendment.

I disagree with Subsection (G)(2)(I) and (G)(2)(II) on page 5, lines 1-17 that discuss what to do with any remaining funds once the Exploratory Committee ends.

The proposed process is to return any remaining funds when an exploratory committee ends on a pro rata basis to the contributors **OR** give the remaining funds to the state or local central committee.

I believe that refunds **MUST** be offered to the contributors first. Only if the refund is refused by the contributor or the committee documents that the contributor did not respond and documents the unsuccessful efforts to contact them, then, and only then, should any funds be donated to a central committee. Some donors may not realize when the exploratory committees have ended and not realize that they could have receive a refund until after any remaining funds have been donated to a central committee.

As proposed, an exploratory committee (that has no restrictions on the amounts that can be donated), could be established for a position when the candidate has no real chance of winning or no real desire of running. By not having to refund any leftover funds to the contributors, these iffy exploratory committees that did not spend much money on the effort could then be used as a de facto fund raiser for the Central Committees. By requiring sufficient record keeping to enable refunds, it would make it more difficult to use bogus exploratory committees as a de facto source of funding for central committees.

Please enter an unfavorable report on SB0065.

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