

February 2, 2021

Testimony on HB 536
Public Financing Act - State Senate and House of Delegates Candidates
and Matching Fund Revisions
Ways and Means

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports HB 536, which would create a small donor matching system for General Assembly candidates so that they can run free from the influence of wealthy donors.

Since the disastrous *Citizens United* decision and its progeny, America's elections have become deluged with outside spending. Wealthy interests have driven up the cost to compete in elections at every level, boxing out candidates who do not have wealthy benefactors but do have support in their communities. Those that can make it through this money gauntlet, must then spend increasingly large percentages of their work days - time that should be spent legislating and hearing the concerns of constituents - on the phone chasing big-money donors.

Maryland is no different. In our [2019 study](#), we analyzed fundraising by winning legislators and found that fundraising expectations for candidates continue to rise. From the years 2015-2018, Senators, on average, received a contribution total of \$266,000.00. This amount of contributions was a slight decrease from the 2014 election cycle, but it is still a significant amount of money raised for state senate seats on average. Delegates received an average contribution total of \$125,499.00, which is a 64% increase from the 2014 election where the average amount fundraised was \$79,878.00.

Maryland should be concerned about the rise in candidate fundraising totals. When the cost to run for office is high, candidates often need to rely on mega donors or corporate interests to be competitive. HB 536, the Public Financing Act, would help to alleviate many of these problems by amplifying the voices of regular Marylanders and giving candidates they support the ability to compete with others backed by big-money interests.

Candidates opting into the public financing program would first have to show sufficient community interest by raising small donations from Maryland voters, refraining from taking donations from non-individuals and donations of \$250 or below. Once they meet qualifying thresholds, at least 250 eligible contributions totaling at \$15,000 for State Senators and at least 150 eligible donations totaling \$15,000 for State Delegates, and the State Board of Elections authorizes the distribution of money after verifying that they have qualified, they would then be matched by funds from the Fair Campaign Financing Fund, at a rate of 6-to-1 or 2-to-1, depending on the size of the contribution, with no match provided for the last \$100. Candidates for State Senator would be eligible to receive \$150,000 per election and candidates for State Delegate eligible for \$90,000 per elections, amounts that we believe would ensure candidates are able to run competitive campaigns in any part of the state.

Because HB 536 could significantly raise the voices of regular Marylanders to compete with the big-money spending unleashed by *Citizens United*, we ask the committee for a favorable report.