

Maryland PIRG

HB568: Public Financing Act - State Senate and House of Delegates Candidates

Government, Labor, and Elections

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Favorable

Maryland PIRG is a statewide public interest advocacy organization based in Baltimore. We work to find common ground around common sense solutions that will help ensure a healthier, safer, more secure future.

Decisions from the Supreme Court have unleashed a wave of mega donors into the electoral process and we are feeling the effects at the local level. The meteoric rise of election spending since these Supreme Court's Citizens United and McCutcheon decisions means candidates and elected officials are often trapped spending an increasing amount of time fundraising from big donors, giving them less time to hear from and serve their constituents. It has also exacerbated the already shrinking faith that citizens have in their elected officials and government.

Small donor public financing enables candidates to run a competitive race without relying on large or corporate donors. In addition to local programs across Maryland, similar programs [have proved effective in Connecticut and New York City](#), where more than 90% of candidates frequently participate in the program.

In 2013, the Maryland General Assembly passed the Campaign Finance Reform Act which made it possible for Maryland counties to establish small donor campaign finance programs locally. Since, Montgomery County, Howard County, Prince George's County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County have all established these new campaign finance systems, and Montgomery County, Howard County and Baltimore City have successfully run elections using the new system. **Now, it is time to modernize and expand Maryland's public financing system at the state level.**

There is no doubt that our democracy is in a fragile state. Faith in government has dramatically declined, as has voter participation and civic engagement. Hyper-partisan politics, misinformation and corporate influence have pushed our federal government into stalemate. Small donor public financing of elections is not a silver bullet to solve our democracy's problems, but it's a good start. By creating alternatives to the traditional funding model for elections and encouraging more participation we can disrupt the stranglehold big money has on our democracy, and Maryland counties are leading the nation to do so.

A Fair Elections program will be better for candidates and elected officials, better for the public, and better for Maryland. This bill is modelled after the success of similar programs in the state and country, with adjustments to meet needs of state races.

We believe that in Maryland, the amount of money your family makes - your race, your gender - should **not** determine the volume of your voice in our elections. But the rise of corporate and large campaign

contributions has forced Maryland elected officials and candidates to be increasingly dependent on these donors, giving them less time to hear from and serve their constituents.

HB568 creates a voluntary program which enables candidates to run for office with small donations from their constituents and remaining competitive with those who accept large and corporate contributions. This serves the dual purpose of reducing corporate and large donor campaign spending and re-engaging the community in the electoral process. And with a Fair Election program in place, we hope to expand opportunities to run for office, so candidates of all backgrounds can run based on the strength of their ideas, not access to money.

In 2023, [Maryland PIRG Foundation released a report](#) which found that Montgomery and Howard County's Fair Elections programs showed strong results. **Key findings in the 2022 elections:**

- Small donors produced 96% of funding to participating candidates, while only providing 3% of funding to candidates who did not participate in the matching program.
- Qualifying candidates received an average contribution of \$124 while the average contribution for non-participating candidates was \$2,137.
- Qualifying candidates received, on average, 186% more contributions from individuals than candidates who did not participate (698 vs 244).
- Qualifying candidates are able to successfully use the matching program to compete on much more equal footing with candidates using traditional financing.
 - The average total contribution for qualifying candidates (including matching funds) was \$335 compared to \$498 for non-participating candidates.
 - By increasing the number of individual donors, qualifying candidates in these races were actually able to raise more money in total and on average per candidate than non-participating candidates.

These types of programs are popular, effective, and gaining momentum.

In 2021, the General Assembly passed the [Maryland Fair Elections Act](#), a bipartisan supported law to [update the state's gubernatorial public financing program](#) to add stronger restrictions on donor participation and shift to a small donor matching system instead of a grant program.

Now it's time to bring the fair elections programs to races for the Maryland General Assembly.

We respectfully request a favorable report.