



TESTIMONY TO THE GOVERNMENT, LABOR AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

HB 568 Public Financing Act - State Senate and House of Delegates Candidates

Position: Favorable

By: Linda T. Kohn, President

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The League of Women Voters believes that the methods of financing political campaigns should: enhance political equality for all citizens; ensure maximum participation by citizens in the political process; protect representative democracy from being distorted by big spending in election campaigns; provide voters sufficient information about candidates and campaign issues to make informed choices; ensure transparency and the public's right to know who is using money to influence elections; enable candidates to compete equitably for public office; ensure that candidates have sufficient funds to communicate their messages to the public; and combat corruption and undue influence in government.

This bill would amend the Fair Campaign Financing Fund that was established in 1970 to provide public matching funds for qualifying candidates for Governor and Lieutenant Governor to include candidates for State Senator and members of the House of Delegates. Providing public funding for campaigns protects representative democracy by leveling the playing field for candidates, regardless of their personal wealth or connections. Additionally, this bill incentivizes candidates to interact widely with voters as they seek support in the form of many small private contributions,

The Fair Campaign Financing Fund wasn't used until 1994 and then again in 2014 by two candidates. This nearly depleted the fund, so legislation in 2015 reinstated a voluntary contribution check-off box on the Maryland Income Tax form as a source of funding along with fines and fees related to campaign finance violations. While the fund has been steadily growing, it is not sufficient to fund expansion to candidates for the legislature. This bill requires that on or before August 1 of the third year immediately preceding a gubernatorial election, the State Board send a notice to the Governor of the amount of money needed to provide adequate funding as described in the legislation so it can be included in their proposed budget.

We also recommend a robust public education campaign asking Marylanders to participate in a voluntary contribution to the Fund when they file their state income tax returns.

We urge a favorable report on HB 568.