



## ISSUE BRIEF:

# Establishing publicly funded elections

### OVERVIEW

Because of Virginia’s lax campaign finance laws, candidates turn to corporations, PACs, wealthy donors, unions, and special interest groups in order to be competitive in the state’s increasingly expensive elections. This creates a system in which candidates are perceived to be more responsive to their donors than their constituents. Campaign finance reform measures like contribution limits and stricter disclosure laws can help alleviate this issue. In addition to these measures, publicly funded elections could also help to maintain the integrity and fairness of Virginia’s elections.

### What are publicly funded elections?

In publicly funded elections, candidates receive public money — not contributions from large donors — to use for campaign expenses. These funds could come from tax revenue (as is the case in Connecticut, where the Citizens’ Election Fund receives most of its funds from the sale of abandoned property), or other available sustainable revenue streams, such as a tax return checkoff in Hawaii, or surcharges on all civil penalties and criminal fees in Arizona. Candidates that receive public funds agree to adhere to certain spending and contribution limits.

These types of programs have been of interest since the 1907 State of the Union Address by President Theodore Roosevelt when he stated “The need for collecting large campaign funds would vanish if Congress provided an appropriation for the proper and legitimate expenses of each of the great national parties.”

### Why should elections be financed publicly?

- Robust matching funds dramatically increases diversity of candidates.
- Public financing, as mentioned by President Teddy Roosevelt, ensures that no particular donor has an outsized influence on the outcome of any election.
- Public financing would free up elected officials’ time currently devoted to fund raising and would allow them to focus on what is best for all of their constituents, not what is best for only their largest campaign contributors.

### Publicly funded elections exist around the country:

- In states including Vermont, Maine, and Arizona, a commission grants candidates funds equivalent to the state’s campaign expenditure limit once the candidate has received enough small contributions to indicate popularity among the electorate.
- Florida, Minnesota, and West Virginia match small contributions up to a certain amount.
- Public financing of elections is also used at the local level in many jurisdictions. In New York City, last year’s elections highlighted the increased diversity of candidates running and winning in races with support of public funding.