



Feb 6, 2020

Testimony on SB 298
Election Law- Local Public Campaign Financing -Boards of Education
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland and Sierra Club Maryland support SB 298, which would allow for public campaign finance systems in the counties to also cover the board of education, expanding on the Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2013 (CFRA).

The Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2013 included language that allowed counties to create public campaign funding programs that would allow candidates for county council and county executive to run for office with the support of their communities. The Montgomery County Council quickly passed their own program by unanimous vote in 2014. In 2016, a majority of Howard County voters voted in favor of creating their own program. In 2018, the Prince George's County Council passed their own program and Baltimore City voters voted to establish a program as well. As of now, legislators in multiple counties have expressed interest in creating similar programs for their jurisdictions, with Baltimore County recently introducing a charter amendment that, if passed, will be on the ballot in 2020.

In 2018, we saw the first use of Montgomery County's program. In our early research we found that candidates who participated in the matching program and had received money from the matching fund received 92% more contributions from individuals on average than non-participating candidates; nearly twice as many individual donations. We also found that small donations accounted for 94% of total fundraising dollars raised by candidates receiving matching funds, versus only 8% for those not participating in the program. The program was a success with an incredibly diverse, bipartisan mixture of incumbents and first-time candidates having opted into the program and competitively fundraising by soliciting only small-dollar donations from individual members of their community.

These programs have been gaining popularity in Maryland for a simple reason: particularly since the Citizens United decision, Americans across the political spectrum feel that our campaign system is disconnected from the populace, and that LLCs and wealthy individuals render regular Marylanders' voices meaningless in the current campaign finance environment. Small dollar public funding programs, on the other hand, lift up regular Marylanders' voices, and empower those with community-supported ideas who may not have connections to deep-pocketed interests.

While CFRA allows counties to address this problem for county council candidates, the problem exists at every level from Governor on down. Common Cause Maryland supports lifting up the voices of regular Americans in every election for every office, and so we request a favorable report on SB 298 to allow counties to continue to expand public funding programs at their discretion.