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## Campaign finance reform

### Public funding would broaden political dialogue

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A recent poll showing that 63 percent of Maryland's registered voters would support a pilot program for public campaign financing offers further evidence that reform is needed sooner, rather than later. That the poll was conducted during a painful recession puts an exclamation point on the will of the state's voters.

At issue is the idea of publicly-funded campaigns, which gained significant traction on legislation co-sponsored by Democratic Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller of Prince George's County in the 2009 General Assembly session. The opt-in program would have provided qualifying candidates who agree to limit their spending and reject contributions from private sources with a combined \$9 million in public funds from voluntary tax check-offs. The funding mechanism works by having candidates collect a significant number of small contributions in their districts, demonstrating enough community support to be viable. That would trigger an injection of public dollars, enabling the candidates to compete with those funded by wealthier constituencies.

Public funding, despite current budgetary concerns, offers many long-term benefits, and the proposed start date is far enough away that the state will likely be on more solid financial footing.

First, it offers elected leaders and candidates the means to avoid seeking large sums of money from special interest groups, thereby enabling them to vote as they see fit. Money from interest groups and wealthy businesses makes up a significant portion of Maryland's elections. For example, in the 2006 election cycle, the top fundraiser in the General Assembly was Miller, with \$1.22 million. Of that, just 35 percent came from individuals, with 57 percent from businesses and political action committees. House of Delegates Speaker Michael Busch, a Democrat representing Anne Arundel County, was second on that list with \$1.2 million, 44 percent of which came from businesses and political action committees and 24 percent of which came from individuals.

Maryland Sen. Paul Pinsky, a Democrat from Prince George's County and a strong supporter of public funding for campaigns, said it's a fact of politics that some people get calls back on their concerns a lot faster than others. "The influence is there ... it's simply not a level playing field," he said.

Pinsky's point, essentially, is one commonly accepted throughout political arenas — that those who have money tend to have greater access to, and influence on, political leaders than those who don't. Pinsky points to the lack of corporate tax loophole reform and the passage of energy deregulation as cases where well-funded interest groups may have defeated principled endeavors.

Another benefit is that this program could restore a modicum of faith in the political process. According to the Gonzales Poll, which was commissioned by the Progressive Maryland Education Fund and Common Cause Maryland, 57 percent of registered voters believe elected officials are "mostly concerned with the needs of those who pay for their campaigns." Further, 77 percent believe that "big campaign contributions have a corrupting influence on state lawmakers in Annapolis."

Talk about an image problem.

Those are numbers that should have representatives worried, but incumbents often have little to fear because money is such an integral part of campaigning in Maryland — candidates in 2006 General Assembly races spent slightly less than \$34 million, compared with about \$28 million in the 2002 races, an increase of more than 20 percent in just one cycle.

That leads to another benefit — the participation of nontraditional candidates in campaigns. In 2002, Maryland General Assembly incumbents outspent opponents nearly two-to-one; that trend continued in 2006. According to a report on the 2002 races from The Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, "Incumbents are in a position to influence public policy, they have a base of contributors from previous campaigns, and they are much more likely to win than other candidates. Challengers, on the other hand, suffer serious fundraising disadvantages. They have little-to-no influence over policy making, typically do not have an established base of supporters, and have slim prospects of winning."

With public funding, challengers could compete with incumbents, broadening the political dialogue and offering voters more choices come Election Day. For supporters of free market principles — of ideas in this case — public funding offers the ultimate model, as candidates with diverse ideas will be have an equal opportunity to pitch their platforms to voters.

Far too often, Pinsky says, elected officials wind up expending energy raising funds for their next campaign rather than engaging in productive political discourse. And it's those very people who represent the biggest hurdle for campaign finance reform — that politicians are being asked to approve legislation that will ultimately threaten their positions. But it seems reasonable that anyone elected to state office who would refer to himself or herself as a "public servant" would be able to look past self-serving votes.