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Cleaner Maryland Elections

Public financing is a small price to pay for good government.

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COUNT THIS among sentences we never thought we would write: Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) has come out for meaningful campaign finance reform. Mr. Miller, who has thwarted previous efforts to allow public financing for legislative campaigns, is now sponsoring a bill that would do just that. Mr. Miller's change of heart is welcome, even if it comes with some pricey strings attached: Contribution limits will also rise. Still, considering the potential benefits of public financing, that's a worthwhile trade-off.

Maryland state office candidates raised about $93.6 million for the 2006 elections, up 69 percent from the 2002 cycle. Such costly elections favor incumbents -- on average, nine out of 10 Maryland officeholders win reelection -- and price out challengers who have worthy ideas but a limited ability to bring in donations. Fundraising contests can also leave candidates feeling indebted to the special interests that fund their campaigns.

The legislation, sponsored by Mr. Miller and by campaign finance reform advocates Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George's) and Del. Jon S. Cardin (D-Baltimore County), would help change that. The bill could eventually provide up to $100,000 in funding to credible state Senate candidates and up to $80,000 for House of Delegates candidates. To qualify for the funds, candidates would have to first secure 350 donations of $5 or more. In return, candidates would agree not to seek further private dollars. A partially funded system would be in place for the 2014 elections; if successful, the program could then receive full funding from a dedicated source. Candidates wouldn't be required to take public financing, but in Arizona, Connecticut and Maine, which have comparable systems, most do. Public financing has made elections more competitive in those states, though incumbents usually still come out on top.

Public financing legislation has passed the Maryland House before but has fallen short in the Senate. In exchange for Mr. Miller's support, which makes Senate approval likely, advocates of campaign finance reform agreed to increase the sum that individuals may give to all candidates from $10,000 to $15,000. The amount that individuals and political committees can give to specific candidates would increase by 10 percent. Yesterday, a Senate committee advanced the bill, an encouraging start.

Critics say that public financing -- if elections are fully funded, at an estimated $28 million per election cycle -- is an unnecessary burden during an economic downturn. We think it is a reasonable price to pay for a cleaner and more competitive election process.

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