



Emily Scarr, Maryland PIRG Director  
Council Bill 004-2018 An Act Concerning Public Campaign Financing  
Position: Support  
Thursday, June 7, 2018  
Public Safety and Fiscal Management Committee  
Chaired by Councilmember Derrick Leon Davis

*Maryland Public Interest Research Group (Maryland PIRG) is a citizen funded public interest advocacy organization with grassroots members in Baltimore and across the state, and a student funded and student directed chapter at the University of Maryland College Park. Our Democracy for the People Campaign aims to curb the impact of big money on our democracy and empower everyday citizens.*

**As the Director of Maryland PIRG, I urge you to support Council Bill 004-2018 - An Act Concerning Public Campaign Financing.** I would like to thank Chair Davis for holding this hearing, Councilmembers Lehman and Franklin for introducing the bill, and Councilmembers Patterson, and Taveras for cosponsoring the legislation.

Our student chapter at the University of Maryland has been working to support small donor campaign finance reform for Prince George's through petition drives and educating their peers. This school year they collected 1,000 petitions from UMD Students to support this bill.

We believe Prince George's County elections should be funded by county residents and contributions should be limited to what the average Prince Georgian can afford to make. This will help ensure that all people have more or less equal opportunity to influence elections regardless of race, gender, age, geography, or income.

A Fair Elections program for Prince George's is a voluntary program which enables candidates to run for office with these principles while remaining competitive with those who accept large and corporate contributions. This serves the dual purpose of reducing corporate and large donor campaign spending and re-engaging the community in the electoral process.

With a Fair Election program in place, we hope to expand opportunities to run for office, so candidates of all backgrounds can run based on the strength of their ideas not access to money.

**BACKGROUND:** Recent decisions from the Supreme Court, like the *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon*, have unleashed a wave of mega donors into the electoral process and we are feeling the effects at the local level. The meteoric rise of election spending since these decisions means candidates and elected officials are often trapped spending an increasing amount of time fundraising from big donors, giving them less time to hear from and serve their constituents. It has also exacerbated the already shrinking faith that citizens have in government.

Local offices are not exempt from these issues – in fact, we expect the removal of restrictions on aggregate contributions limits to lead to increased spending by mega donors on local elections. Our research has found that this decision will cause \$1 billion in increased spending through the 2020 elections from less than 3,000 donors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McCutcheon Money, U.S. PIRG and Demos, October, 2013, <http://uspig.org/reports/usp/mccutcheon-could-add-over-1-billion-contributions-next-four-elections>

An October 2017 Poll from the University of Maryland and the Washington Post found that Americans, regardless of political affiliation agree the money in politics is a big issue and are not happy the way our democracy is going.<sup>2</sup>

- 36% said they are not proud of the way democracy works in America, up from 18% in 2014.
- Money in politics was listed as the #1 cause for dysfunction in the U.S. political system, with a whopping 96% of respondents saying in had "A lot" (65%) or "some" (31%) to do with the problem.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO:** We need create a campaign finance system where every Prince George's resident, regardless of wealth has more or less equal opportunity to influence the actions of our government. Small donor public financing enables candidates to run a competitive race without being reliant on large or corporate donors. In 2013, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law enabling local governments to establish this new way to fund elections. Montgomery County passed their program in 2014 and Howard County passed theirs in 2017. Similar programs have proven effective in Connecticut and New York City.

Montgomery County's program is in effect for the 2018 elections. As of January:

- Candidates who had qualified received nearly twice as many donations from Montgomery County residents than those not participating.
- Those not participating received only 8% of their donations from people giving less than \$150, while those participating received more than 90% of their donations from people giving less than \$150.

The bill being considered today has some similarities and some key differences than those passed in other jurisdictions to ensure it reflects the demographics and unique qualities of the community. Here are a few important details of the program.

- **Encourage participation:** By providing matching funds for small contributions from district residents, candidates are encouraged to seek out widespread support from the community.
- **Elevate the voices of everyday people:** Match small contributions so candidates are encouraged to seek broad support and community members without deep pockets are incentivized to get involved in the political process. This bill goes a step further than Montgomery and Howard Counties' programs by providing the highest match for donations of \$25 or less, an adjustment we think is important to reflect income levels in the county.
- **Expand opportunities to run for office:** People qualify by building support in their community. This allows people from all backgrounds to run for office on the strength of their ideas, not access to money, and will help maintain a diverse and representative government.
- **Keep big money out:** Participating candidates cannot accept large contributions (greater than \$150) or any contributions for corporations or PACs. This helps address influence or the appearance of influence by special interests on policy decisions.

The fight to overturn Citizen's United will likely be decades long, but this is something we can do now. The Fair Election Fund will encourage candidates to voluntarily reject large and corporate contributions by providing limited matching funds for small donations from district residents.

There is no doubt that our democracy is in a fragile state. But it is within our power to empower county residents in in our elections and build a democracy for the people. You have an incredible opportunity with the Fair Election Fund, and I hope you take it. Thank you for your time and service to our community.

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<sup>2</sup> Most Americans say politics have reached a dangerous new low point, Washington Post and University of Maryland, October 28, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2017/10/28/National-Politics/Polling/release\\_497.xml](https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2017/10/28/National-Politics/Polling/release_497.xml)