

Public financing of elections FAQ

Public financing of elections means that the people as a whole, the taxpayers, provide the funds needed for candidates to run for office, and therefore once elected, officials are accountable to all the citizens, rather than only to wealthy people and special interests.

Each candidate voluntarily decides whether to participate in the public financing system. Qualification for publicly funded campaigns usually involves agreeing to limit overall campaign spending and use of personal funds and to abide by other campaign and ethical requirements, such as agreeing to be audited and participating in public debates.

Candidates then receive matching public funds as they obtain contributions to their campaigns (in a “Clean Money” system they receive enough money to run their campaigns without any private funds).

Public financing will:

- Let qualified people run for office even if they don't have access to a lot of money
- Make candidates accountable to the people who elect them
- Decrease tax breaks and subsidies to big contributors
- Allow politicians to concentrate on legislating not on fundraising
- Increase participation in the electoral process
- Uphold democracy by ensuring that all qualified candidates have an opportunity to discuss their views on important issues, as well as to object to the opinions of others

Not with my taxes you don't.

Right now special interest groups are making investments when they contribute to candidates. In return for their contributions, they are awarded tax breaks, special favors and government bailouts – all of which come from taxpayer dollars. With public financing, tax dollars will be spent in the interests of all people, not wasted to pay back campaign contributors.

Politicians are accountable to those who fund them. If your taxes fund a candidate, he or she will be accountable to you.

Public financing is welfare for politicians.

In effect, we already are supporting politicians. For example, every time you buy gas, a fraction of the money you spend is used by the oil company to lobby politicians. That money comes from us, the consumers, but it is not used to advance our interests. Public financing is an investment made in democracy, not in any individual politician.

I don't want to support any person from off the street.

Public financing will support only eligible and serious candidates. Candidates have to meet special requirements (for example raising a specified amount of money in small dollar contributions) so that without real support they can't meet the qualifications for public funds. However, all serious candidates will have an equal chance to receive public financing, regardless of their views.

But why should I pay for the campaign of someone I don't agree with?

Presently, some of my tax money and some of yours goes to fund the election information produced by the Secretary of State, including pro and con ballot arguments. Why do we put up with this? Because it is the public infrastructure of democracy. We all have an interest in supporting an elective process in which every candidate's ideas and qualifications are communicated fairly.

Furthermore, if a politician is corrupt or has disgusting views, challengers supported by public financing will be able to communicate this to the voters. And if candidates with views we don't like run for office, public financing make it possible to refute their positions and have a real debate on the issues.

Public financing is a non-partisan issue that people across the political spectrum can agree upon. It is about democracy, not a particular point of view.

I won't support wasteful spending.

The best way to get rid of wasteful spending is to get rid of wealthy donors and special interests who expect a pay-back for their campaign support.

The rich will always win by outspending everyone else.

Since the system of public financing is voluntary, candidates who refuse to take public funds and limit what they spend can indeed raise and spend as much as they want to. However, public financing offers other candidates the chance to get their message out to the public. And the truth is that wealthy candidates don't always win. People don't like it when candidates try to buy their way into office. It makes sense to voters that candidates limiting spending and qualifying for public funds will be free to support what is good for people, not what is needed to pay back their campaign supporters.

Disclosure is more important than public financing.

Being able to see the names and occupations of major campaign contributors is indeed essential. However, disclosure or reporting is not enough. It is not realistic to expect that voters will make the effort to analyze all campaign contributions, and with every candidate receiving money from big contributors, our elected officials will still be disproportionately influenced by special interests. With public financing, citizens can be confident that their elected officials will be responsive to *their* needs.

I doubt public financing would really work.

Public financing of state elections has already been adopted in Maine, Arizona and Connecticut. Those states have seen an increase in the number of competitive elections, more women and minority candidates and a decrease in the determining role of money in campaigns.

Public financing is unconstitutional.

The courts are primarily concerned about reforms that would limit the amount of contributions to or spending in a campaign on the basis that limiting spending stops candidates from communicating with voters. However, the courts have expressly and consistently upheld public financing.

Public financing allows spending limits to be enforced because candidates voluntarily limit how much they spend on their campaigns in order to receive public funds. Public financing allows for more political speech by a larger and more diverse group of candidates because it provides more opportunity to get political messages out to voters. Public financing broadens the political dialogue and enhances democracy.