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Editorial | Island Voices

Check 'yes' box to limit special-interest politics

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Every year, Hawaii taxpayers are given the choice of marking "yes" or "no" on their income tax return for \$3 to go to the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund. Money from the fund is used to publicly fund state and county political campaigns.

Public funding of campaigns is a powerful alternative to the bankrolling of campaigns by private special interests, especially when coupled with increased transparency.

The 2014 midterm elections were the most expensive in U.S. history, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. In Hawaii, candidates received a whopping \$19.9 million in contributions for state and county campaigns, the state Campaign Spending Commission reported.

Nearly all of these contributions were large donations from individuals and special interest groups (e.g. labor, real estate, insurance, finance). In addition, \$7.4 million was spent locally by 29 Super PACs to support and oppose candidates. Incessant big-budget "message-shaping" TV and radio ads, glossy mailers and telemarketing overshadowed grassroots campaigning and candidate debates.

Escalating campaign contributions by monied interests have left voters wondering who a candidate will represent once elected, while also creating a high stakes "pay-to-play" system. Increasingly, potential candidates are barred from running for office because they cannot afford the high cost of campaigning or must rely heavily on special-interest funders to back them.

Once elected, legislators must continue to fundraise to help maintain their seat. In fact,

national studies show that legislators typically spend between 30-60 percent of their time fundraising, valuable time that could be spent meeting with constituents, researching issues or crafting legislation.

There is considerable bipartisan support nationwide to rein in out-of-control private campaign funding. One commonly recommended solution is to institute small donor/public campaign funding programs as an alternative to private funding.

The good news is Hawaii is one of few states that has a partial public campaign funding program. The Hawaii Election Campaign Fund supports the program, which is administered by the Hawaii Campaign Spending Commission. Sadly, the program has been seriously underfunded for many years and can only partially fund a handful of campaigns each year.

If adequately funded, Hawaii could upgrade its program to a comprehensive public campaign financing program. With a full public-funding program, candidates who opt for public funding would first prove sufficient constituent support for their candidacy by collecting a specified minimum number of signatures accompanied by small donations. Once the qualified donation mark is reached, the candidate receives public funding in an amount that allows the candidate to compete competitively (using a formula based on previous campaign spending for the office they are seeking). The candidate may collect additional donations, but only in small amounts — typically \$50 per person. This "small donor" public-funding system puts elections back into the hands of citizens where they belong.

Hawaii taxpayers who want "citizen owned" versus "special-interest owned" elections can make their voices heard every year at tax time by marking "yes" on their return for \$3 to go to the Hawaii Election Campaign. The \$3 will be designated to the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund from the general fund.

Marking "Yes" will not affect an individual or couple's tax refund. Residents who use professional tax preparers are urged to let them know up front they want to mark "yes" to the \$3 checkoff because preparers often default to "no" unless informed otherwise.

Public funding of campaigns is a critically important step toward ensuring Hawaii elections and government reflect the will of citizens rather than special interests. Take action this tax season by supporting the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund — mark "yes" to the \$3 checkoff on your state income tax return.