

# Public Financing of Elections: Frequently Asked Questions

## Q: HOW DOES PUBLIC FINANCING WORK?

Public Financing of Elections is a voluntary system that seeks to remove the influence of money in politics. Under the system, participating candidates collect a certain number of qualifying contributions. Once they qualify, candidates receive state funds for running both primary and general election campaigns, and publicly financed candidates running against privately financed candidates receive additional funds for every dollar that their opponent raises above their initial allotment.

## Q: HAS IT WORKED ANYWHERE ELSE?

Maine, Arizona, and Connecticut all have passed systems of public financing for legislators and state officeholders, and North Carolina and New Mexico use the system for judicial elections. In Maine participation in the system reached a high of 87% in the 2006 legislative election, and voter participation has increased in Arizona, especially among minority communities.

## Q: WHY SUPPORT PUBLIC FINANCING?

Public Financing of Elections will change the way that politicians and their constituents interact. Politicians benefit by not having to waste time raising money from a handful of donors, for they will be able to meet with constituents about the real issues. Constituents benefit by having representatives in government that represent their values and concerns, rather than those of a few special interests and big donors.

Also, public financing brings traditionally-excluded groups of people, especially women and minorities, into government. Public financing is way to reduce the power of money in electoral politics, and it reinforces the basic democratic tenet of equal and fair representation.

## Q: DOESN'T PUBLIC FINANCING VIOLATE THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

According to the Supreme Court decision in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), political donations do constitute "speech," but, because the system is voluntary, it uses "public money to facilitate and enlarge public discussion and participation in the electoral process, goals vital to a self-governing people." This system allows people to use their money as speech if they wish, but it also gives their opponents the ability to respond in kind.

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visit [www.FairElectionsRI.org](http://www.FairElectionsRI.org) or email [info@FairElectionsRI.org](mailto:info@FairElectionsRI.org)

**Q: HOW MUCH DOES PUBLIC FINANCING COST?**

Assuming participation levels are similar to those in Arizona and Maine, the system is estimated to cost between \$7 million and \$8 million dollars per year in Rhode Island, or about \$7 per person. That means that public financing would cost less than a movie ticket.

**Q: HOW WILL RHODE ISLAND PAY FOR FAIR ELECTIONS?**

There are a number of innovative means for paying for the system; for example, Arizona uses both a portion of its criminal and traffic violation fees and the sale of unclaimed property to support its system. Rhode Island could use similar means, although the most straightforward source of funding would be General Revenue. While it may seem like a \$7 million dollars is a large sum, it actually is about one quarter of one percent (0.25%) of General Revenue.

Also, all of the \$5 qualifying contributions and leftover seed money that the candidates collected would go to the Fair Elections Fund, as well as any leftover money from previous campaigns and fines levied against those who violate the rules of the system. Finally, a tax check-off would be included on Rhode Island income tax returns that would allow you to allocate part or your taxes directly to the Fair Elections Fund.

**Q: WON'T THE \$5 CONTRIBUTIONS INHIBIT POORER CONSTITUENTS FROM TAKING PART IN THE SYSTEM?**

While some legislators oppose the program because they claim that their constituents would not be able to afford the five-dollar qualifying contributions, evidence from Maine and Arizona has shown that this is not true. Maine Representative Jim Annis, for example, has stated that if he had run a privately-financed campaign, he would "lose too many low income constituents who want to be part of [his] reelection."

**Q: HOW WILL THE SYSTEM PREVENT THE MISUSE OF PUBLIC FUNDS?**

Built into the legislation is a system of penalties and fines to be levied against any candidates who abuse the system by accepting both public and private contributions. These fines will be deposited directly into the Fair Elections Fund, which supports future campaigns. Also, the system will be overseen by the Board of Elections and will involve more rigorous reporting requirements.

**Q: WON'T THE SYSTEM GIVE "FRINGE" CANDIDATES ACCESS TO TAXPAYER MONEY?**

The Fair Elections system requires that candidates demonstrate broad support through the collection of small qualifying contributions. A "fringe" candidate without much support would not be able to gather enough of the qualifying contributions to receive public funds. Contests in Maine have shown that the number of unpopular candidates who are able to qualify for funds is very low, for only 15 of 409 candidates in opposed races received less than 40% of the vote.

51% of publicly funded candidates in Maine said the system was a **very important** factor in their decision to run.

The number of minority candidates in Arizona has **doubled** under public financing, going from 6% in 2000 to 14% in 2004.

Public Citizen, "Breaking Free with Fair Elections," March 2007.