

Top 10 Facts You Should Know About Voter-Owned Elections in Olympia

By the Olympia chapter of Washington Public Campaigns August 2008

Elections are the essence of democracy, and a crucial way for citizens to shape their government and their community. So, elections should be about issues and voters, *not* who can raise the most money.

In Olympia, like most communities, less than 3% of the population donates to local political campaigns. That means a handful of people who can afford it get to decide on who can run a serious campaign for elected office. Voter-owned elections allow candidates to enter the race based on having many supporters in the community, not based on the wealth of a few supporters.

Special interest groups, especially development interests, have spent increasing amounts of money to influence recent races for Olympia City Council. Voter-owned elections avoid the reality – and even the appearance – that our elected leaders may be influenced by special interests.

Voter-owned elections eliminate the financial barriers to running for local office for persons who demonstrate broad community support. They also expand the voters' choice of candidates, allow candidates to focus on public issues instead of fundraising, encourage candidates to involve more volunteers in their campaigns, and discourage excessive campaign spending.

Public funding of campaigns, instead of special interest funding, allows democracy to flourish. Join us in bringing voter-owned elections to Olympia!

Top 10 Facts

1. The voter-owned election program is **voluntary**. No candidate is required to participate.
2. To qualify, candidates must collect signatures and \$10 donations from **300 Olympia voters**. Right now, privately-funded council candidates typically have only 100-200 donors, but those donors write bigger checks. So, qualifying for public campaign funds actually requires **more and broader community support**.
3. Once they qualify, candidates may accept **no private donations** nor spend their own money. That means no more time spent fundraising and calling donors, so candidates can instead **focus on voters and issues**.
4. **Volunteering is encouraged**, and doesn't count as a donation. More volunteering – to help candidates stretch their limited campaign funds farther – gets more people directly involved in elections.
5. Candidates receive \$6,000 for the primary election, and another \$9,000 for the general election, enough for a campaign that is **effective but not extravagant**.
6. If a privately-funded opponent raises lots of money, the publicly-funded candidate gets money to match it. This makes the campaign a **fair fight**. The “fair fight funds” are limited to another \$6,000 for the primary election and \$9,000 for the general election. If a third-party group independently spends money on behalf of an opponent, or to attack the publicly-funded candidate, the **special interest money is also matched**.

7. Candidates may spend public funds **only for campaign purposes**. This is strictly defined in state law. Also, candidates may not use public funds to pay or buy things from themselves or a relative, nor give away the funds to other candidates or organizations. This rule is **even stricter than state law**.
8. **Using public campaigns funds for personal gain is a crime**. The candidate must return all public funds, spent or unspent, plus interest and fees – and would face criminal penalties.
9. Unintentional or minor violations of the rules require the candidate to return the public funds involved and pay a small penalty. But if a candidate repeatedly violates the rules, or drops out of the race (except for a family emergency), then the candidate **must return all public funds**, spent or unspent, plus interest and fees.
10. The entire voter-owned election program has an **overall spending cap** of \$2.50 per Olympia resident per year. The actual cost will depend on how many candidates qualify. Based on recent elections, the anticipated cost is between **\$1.30 and \$1.80 per Olympia resident** per year.

For more information about Voter-Owned Elections in Olympia, or to get involved in this effort, please contact Monica Hoover, with the Olympia chapter of Washington Public Campaigns, at (360) 943-3070 or thurston@washclean.org.