

The Six Pillars of Fair Elections Systems

Report by: Brennan Center for Justice • Common Cause
• Democracy Matters • Public Campaign • Public Citizen • U.S. PIRG

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1. Candidates seeking public funding collect "seed money" to initiate their campaigns.

Fair Elections systems permit candidates to start campaigns by collecting a set amount of seed money. Fair Elections systems limit these contributions to about \$100 per donor (versus the \$2,300 per election limit that currently applies to federal candidates). There is a ceiling on the total amount of seed money candidates may collect. Seed money pays for campaign costs, such as opening an office, hosting community meetings, and raising qualifying contributions.

2. Candidates collect qualifying contributions to show that they have support.

Fair Elections systems require candidates to prove they are serious and viable before becoming eligible for public funds. Candidates pass this test by collecting a significant number of small contributions, generally on the order of \$5 each. The number of qualifying contributions required varies from system-to-system and office-to-office. The Senate bill requires candidates to collect a baseline of 2,000 qualifying contributions, plus another 500 for each congressional district, in excess of one, in their state.

3. Candidates who qualify must abide by spending limits.

Once qualified, publicly funded candidates may no longer accept contributions or spend personal money on their campaigns. Candidates' spending is limited to the allocation they receive.

4. It's voluntary.

Candidates who do not want to participate do not have to. Fair Elections systems do not impose new rules or demands on privately funded candidates, other than sometimes requiring more frequent filings of campaign finance reports. Timely reports allow publicly funded candidates to receive additional "fair fight" public funds promptly if opposition spending exceeds certain amounts.

5. Participating candidates must comply with simple spending rules.

Participating candidates must comply with guidelines concerning how the public's money is spent and account for all expenditures.

6. Participating candidates receive adequate funds.

Neither public nor private funding systems ensure that candidates have as much money to spend as their opponents. But Fair Elections programs are designed to provide enough money for participating candidates to be competitive. The bill under consideration in the Senate would furnish major party Senate candidates with \$750,000, plus another \$150,000, for each congressional district (beyond one) in a candidate's state for general elections. The bill allocates smaller amounts for primary campaigns. Fair Elections programs provide additional "fair fight" funds when opposition spending exceeds established thresholds. The proposal in the Senate allows publicly funded candidates to receive up to three times their standard allotment if facing a highly funded opponent. The proposal also calls for fair fight funds to be provided to counter opposition spending by independent groups.