



**Testimony for the House Ways and Means Committee
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HB 785 - Maryland Small Donor Incentive Act

SUPPORT

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The ACLU of Maryland supports HB 785, which establishes a system of public campaign financing. Public campaign financing enhances the accountability of public officials to general voters, so they are thereby less obliged to the interests of high-dollar contributors. Public campaign financing allows candidates and officials to invest their time and energies into investigating and remedying the concerns of the electorate, not seeking campaign contributions.

The election of public officials is an essential aspect of a free society and the integrity of the electoral process is of critical concern. However, the ACLU of Maryland is also concerned that election campaign reforms are sometimes achieved by means that sacrifice other civil liberties values, especially freedom of expression and rights of association.

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Although free speech principles call for scrutiny of limitations on expenditures and contributions, the current system of private campaign financing disadvantages certain groups and individuals trying to communicate their views. Such imbalances tend to frustrate the goal of full political participation by all citizens and raise concerns about the greater influence that some individuals and groups have on political processes. The appropriate civil liberties response is to expand, not limit, the resources available for political advocacy.

Public financing of campaign activity is a promising way to facilitate the opportunity for political participation by everyday citizens. Such approaches, which are less drastic alternatives than government restriction of political expenditures and contributions, also minimize the danger of heavy handed and repressive governmental regulation of political speech and association.

The escalating cost of campaigns for public office restricts the breadth of political expression in America. More and more, money, not political support, determines who runs for office. Many candidates fail because they cannot garner the requisite financial support to run a viable campaign, which deprives the public of the full range of public debate. Public financing remedies this problem and would advance a number of positive free speech values. It would facilitate candidacy and significantly broaden the spectrum of campaign debate. Public financing can also reduce the dependency of candidates upon private contributions regardless of the extent to which such contributions may be permitted.

For the foregoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland supports HB 785.