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Compromise Reached On Campaign Finance Rules

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. -- Two senators who have butted heads over campaign finance reform said Friday they have reached a compromise that could make Maryland the fourth state in the nation with a public campaign finance system.

Watch: David Collins' Report

Sen. Paul Pinsky, D-Prince George's, who has been pushing for years for campaign finance reform, held a news conference with Senate President Mike Miller, who has opposed Pinsky's legislation in recent years.

In return for public campaign financing, limits on contributions for candidates who choose to use the old system will rise.

The individual campaign contribution limit to a candidate will go up from \$4,000 to \$4,400. The limit for political action committees would rise from \$6,000 to \$6,600. Overall, contributions a person can make in a four-year election cycle will go from \$10,000 to \$15,000.

While Pinsky said the increases may appear to be at variance with the reforms he is seeking, he pointed out that they don't keep pace with the Consumer Price Index since the limits were established in 1991. Pinsky also said the public system could lay the groundwork for candidates to increasingly use a public campaign financing system in the future.

"I think, in fact, it has seeds for the destruction of the old way of doing things, and I think as more people use it, it will spread to the point where that will become de rigeur in the way that people will act."

Miller, D-Calvert, said the rising costs of political campaigns helped sway him, both to moderately increase legal donations for the old system and to create a public campaign system. "The cost of elections has skyrocketed," Miller said. "It's out of sight. It discourages young people from getting involved in the electoral process."

Miller, who opposed previous bills because state money would have been used to finance it entirely, said he vigorously supported the proposal and was optimistic for its passage.

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The public campaign financing system would be phased in from 2011 through 2014. To pay for it, the legislation would use \$5 million in public financing set aside for the governor's race that has not been used.

The bill also would create a checkoff on state income tax forms for a taxpayer to voluntarily choose to put \$5 toward a fund. Pinsky said it's difficult to estimate how many taxpayers would opt to do that, but he cited one estimate indicating it could add up to about \$1 million a year, creating a pool of \$9 million for elections in 2014.

After that, Pinsky said the \$5 tax form checkoff would remain, and the bill would have a commission review how the system worked in 2014 and finalize a funding source.

Candidates could voluntarily choose to accept funding from the public campaign financing system or continue to seek donations under the old system.

To qualify for public money, a candidate would have to acquire 350 small contributions of \$5 or more from registered voters in a district. A candidate also would have to raise an additional \$1,000.

Senate candidates would be eligible for \$100,000 in public money, if they are running in a contested primary and a general election. House candidates would be eligible for up to \$80,000.

"You have to agree to accept that public money and no private money and stay within the limits and any other restrictions," Pinsky said.

Common Cause Maryland, a political watchdog group, approved of the deal.

Ryan O'Donnell, director of Common Cause Maryland, described it as a "hard compromise," but he noted years of deadlock on the issue hasn't helped. He also pointed out that three other states, Connecticut, Arizona and Maine, have public campaign financing.

"Public financing is also going to bring new voices into our politics," O'Donnell said. "We've seen from elsewhere in Arizona and Connecticut and Maine that this reform is incumbent neutral," O'Donnell said.

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