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Fair Elections Program, Even During Pandemic, Meets its Goals

Positive impact includes amplifying “voices of everyday voters,” reining in influence of wealthy/corporate donors, and expanding local candidate base

Aug. 2, 2021 (WASHINGTON) Despite an unusual election year during the COVID-19 pandemic and challenges associated with its start-up, the District’s Fair Elections Program (FEP) reshaped the playing field in the 2020 D.C. Council and Board of Education elections—in the number of candidates, parity in access to funding, and candidate focus on outreach to District voters—according to a new report by the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA).

ODCA partnered with Fors Marsh Group (FMG) to assess the initial implementation of the FEP during the 2020 election cycle with a quantitative analysis of contribution and other data, as well as in-depth interviews with candidates and staff at the Office of Campaign Finance (OCF), to determine how well the FEP met its intended goals.

Participating candidates must agree to a lower contribution limit, a total ban on corporate and political action committee (PAC) contributions, restrictions on the amount candidates and their immediate family may contribute to their campaign, and to participation in candidate debates. To qualify for public funding, a candidate must obtain a required number of small-dollar contributions from individuals who live in D.C., with a total value that meets a certain threshold based on the office for which the candidate is running. The report found the FEP met its intended goals, which included:

Increasing candidate participation. The report found that in previous election cycles, the number of candidates in races for D.C. Council seats ranged from 24 candidates in 2016 to 32 candidates in 2014. In 2020, however, 53 candidates were on the ballot in D.C. Council races.

Reducing corporate contributions. The percentage of campaign funding coming from corporate contributions has dropped notably since 2012 among both campaigns for D.C. Council and for the Board of Education.

Creating greater access to funding. For FEP candidates, the median amount of total funding was higher than for non-FEP candidates in races for both D.C. Council and the Board of Education. Unlike the average funding, which can be skewed by campaigns receiving very large or very small amounts of total funding, the median shows funding levels for middle-of-the-pack candidates. Furthermore, there are notably large differences in median amounts between FEP and non-FEP candidates for both D.C. Council (\$90,226.00) and Board of Education (\$9,105.81) elections. These factors all suggest that the FEP created greater access to funding for participating candidates.

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The report includes data about sources of election funding, including personal, corporate, and individual contributions, and contributions from inside vs. outside D.C.

The report also analyzed the effect of the FEP on electoral competition-results, finding that the FEP appears to be associated with a more equitable distribution of financial contributions across candidates. Also, the report says, candidates are not just more financially viable but also better able to run competitive campaigns that attract voters at the ballot box.

ODCA tasked FMG with conducting in-depth interviews with candidates who participated in the FEP during the 2020 election cycle to understand their experiences. The report found that OCF and the FEP were key to increasing candidates' participation and viability and were "extremely responsive" to candidate needs.

"Instead of focusing on a few people who would give a large chunk of money, I focused more on small donors. It pushed me to think about a broader diversity of people to solicit from and it really focused my efforts on D.C."

--Candidate for D.C. elected office

First-time candidates indicated that FEP funding was key to mounting a competitive campaign and getting their message out to constituents. In many cases, these two factors were linked: many candidates indicated that soliciting donations from a broad group of small donors throughout D.C., also provided an opportunity for lesser-known candidates to get their message out to a wider audience.

Candidates also recommended increasing public awareness of the program and suggested that OCF's online portal should be compatible with large donation platforms to alleviate the burden of data entry involved in the reporting process.

Many states and localities across the United States have implemented campaign finance programs similar to the FEP in recent years, all with the intended goal of bridging the gap between candidates and the constituents that they represent. FMG undertook a review of these programs to understand how the FEP aligns, or differs, in program implementation and intended outcomes, and to identify best practices that could potentially be incorporated into future iterations of the FEP. The results of this review are outlined in a best practices section in the report.

Fair Elections Program Amplifies "Voices of Everyday Voters," is the first of three reports evaluating the 2020 elections in D.C. FMG's elections research team is completing a second study that evaluates the overall administration of elections in 2020, looking at the use of mail ballots, early voting, and production of results during the pandemic year. A third report will be an audit by ODCA staff of the FEP's use of funds.

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