



PORTLAND

CLEAN ELECTIONS

REPORT

Success of Portland's first run of Clean Elections



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Clean Elections in Portland:

The First Year

In this report, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections (MCCE) investigates the impact of the first year of Clean Elections and offers recommendations for improvements.

Fair Elections Portland and Maine Citizens for Clean Elections began the campaign to establish a Clean Elections system in Portland in 2019. The charter revision was approved by voters in 2022. In 2023, the first candidates were able to use Portland's Clean Elections program.

A full timeline is available [here](#).

I. Introduction

Overall, the first use of Clean Elections in Portland was a success. The majority of candidates chose to use the program. These candidates mostly reported being satisfied with their choice, and that they would use Clean Elections again. Election spending was significantly lower than in past cycles, and at least 2,500 Portland voters participated by making qualifying contributions, more than double the number of contributors in the last cycle with a mayoral election.

We congratulate these pioneering candidates and the City Clerk and elections staff for implementing a successful program on a very tight schedule. Candidates all reported that the city staff were helpful and worked hard to ensure that candidates had the information and support they needed.

The first cycle highlighted several key areas for improvement, including Charter requirements that have not yet been implemented. We are pleased to see that several of these changes are already underway. We encourage the Council, Clerk, and community partners to make these additional improvements as soon as possible before the 2024 election.

II. Clean Elections by the Numbers

Candidate Participation

In 2023, elections were held for the mayor, three city council positions (one at-large and two districts), and three school board positions (one at-large and two districts). Most races were contested, except for the district school board races. In those uncontested races, no money was raised or spent. In the contested races, 13 candidates participated, and seven chose to use Clean Elections.

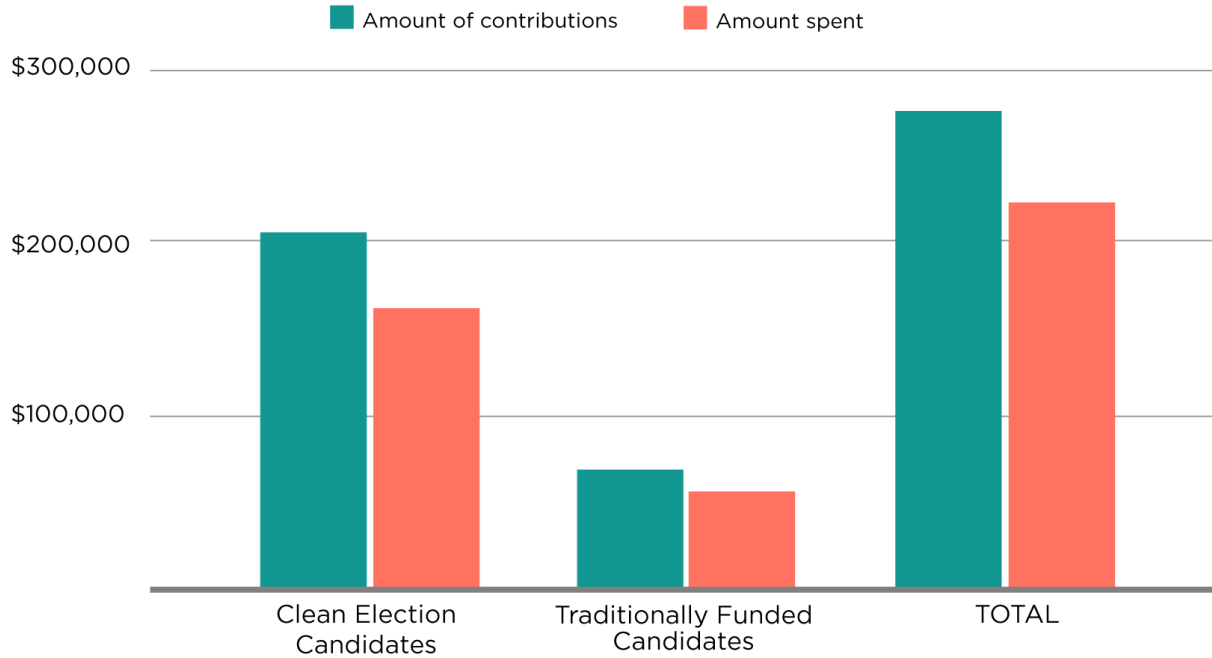
This 54% participation rate, while lower than the 63% participation rate by state legislative candidates in the Maine Clean Elections program in 2022, is significantly higher than the 30% participation rate when that state program first rolled out in 2000.

Many candidates chose to take advantage of the opportunity to secure supplemental funding beyond their initial distribution. One candidate stayed at the initial distribution, one maxed out with all three supplemental payments, while the remaining candidates took one or two additional payments.

This range of usage suggests that the supplemental funding and total amount available were appropriate to the needs of candidates and that candidates were able to right-size their campaigns.

Clean Elections candidates won in three of the five races.

Contributions in the 2023 Election



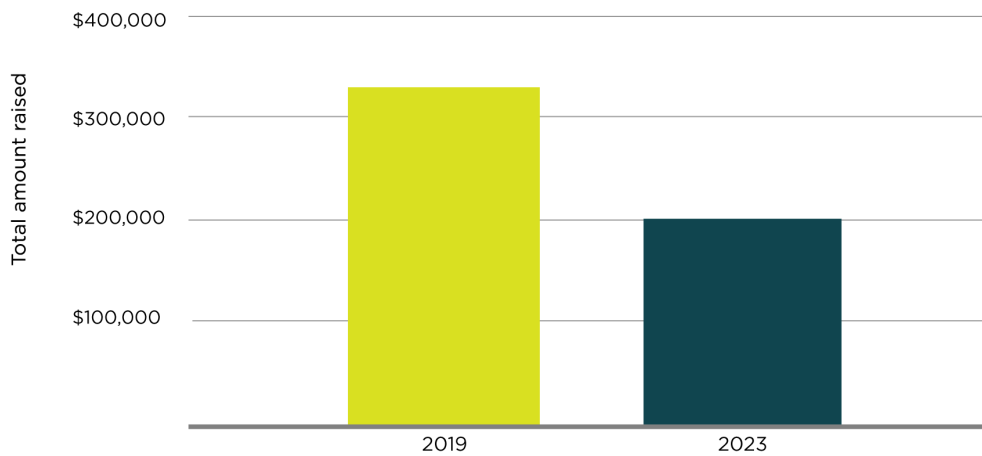
Spending is Down

The total amount of election spending declined when compared to the last comparable years.

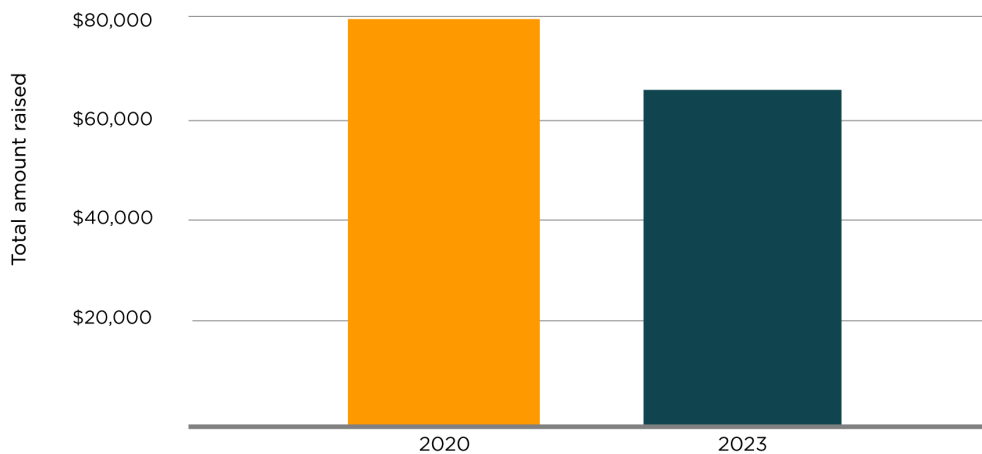
In 2019, a record \$330,239 was spent on the mayor's race, with two candidates spending well over \$100,000 each. This year, a total of \$200,321 was spent, and the largest campaign spent \$78,498. Two of the six candidates used Clean Elections, including the highest-spending campaign.

Similar dynamics apply to other offices when compared to the last time these seats were up in 2020. The total spent on city council and school board this year was \$65,843, compared to \$99,389 in 2020.

Comparing 2019 and 2023 Mayoral Races



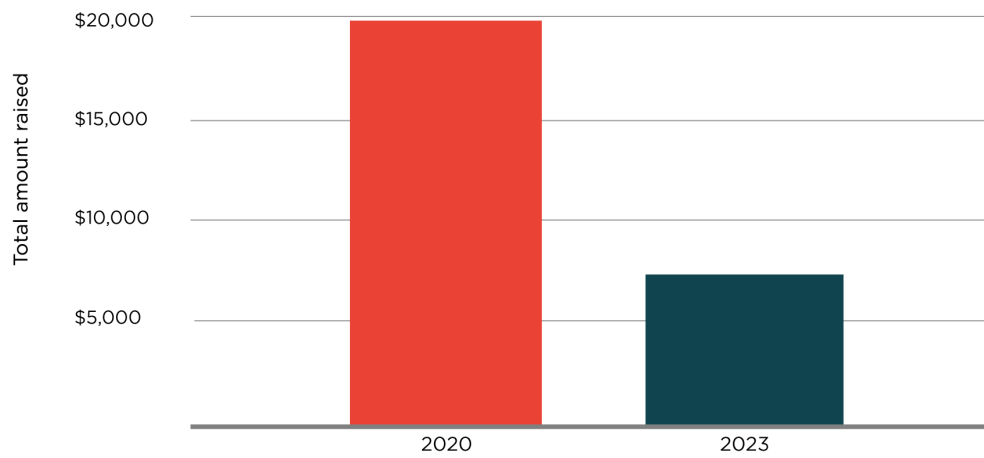
Comparing 2020 and 2023 City Council Races



In the at-large council race this year, the two candidates, both using Clean Elections, spent a total of \$33,031. In 2020, the four candidates running spent a total of \$58,517.

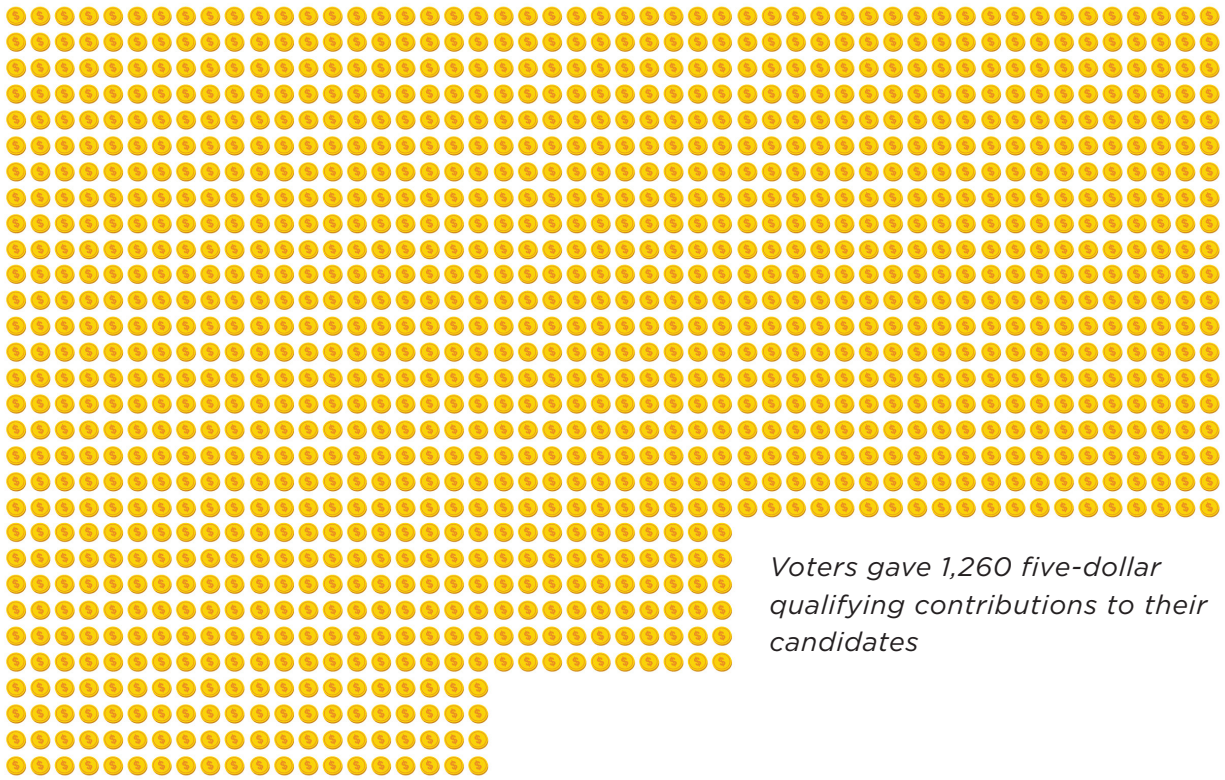
The only races with higher spending year-on-year are the district council seats, where this year \$12,640 was spent in District 4, and \$14,072 in District 5. In 2020 those races were \$8,915 and \$12,053, respectively. In both districts, there was one Clean Elections candidate and one using private funding.

Comparing 2020 and 2023 City School Board Races



In the at-large school board race, the two candidates, one of whom used Clean Elections, spent a total of \$6,000. In 2020, \$14,160 was spent by three candidates.

The two district school board races were uncontested, with the sole candidates not raising or spending any money.



More voters engaged thanks to Clean Elections

The number of individuals making donations has increased, thanks to the qualifying contribution requirements: 1,260 five-dollar qualifying contributions were made to the seven Clean Elections candidates. While individuals may have given to more than one candidate, this is still a remarkable number of voters involved, compared to the approximately 289 individuals who gave to the privately financed candidates¹. Private donations averaged \$279.

All the qualifying contributions, by law, came from Portland voters, while 42% of private donations came from individuals outside of the city, and 13% from outside of Maine.

1. Donations under \$50 are allowed to be reported on one line and not differentiated by contributor.



Status of the Clean Elections Fund

The Clean Elections fund received an initial special appropriation for \$465,000 in fiscal year 2023-24. During the cycle, candidates received \$196,047.82 in Clean Elections funds, and returned \$14,592. Qualifying contributions totaling \$16,075.66 were deposited in the fund. At the end of the cycle, \$285,068.45 is left in the fund to roll over for future election cycles.²

The costs of the 2023 election were lower than initially anticipated. However, we urge caution in drawing strong conclusions about future demands on the fund based on one election. The city should continue with the existing funding levels and allow the fund to build in anticipation of future mayoral or high-demand years before considering whether the allocations to candidates and/or to the Fund should be reduced.

2. These figures are based on the report issued by the City Clerk to the Council on February 5, 2024.

III. Candidate Perspectives

After the election, MCCE researchers interviewed 12 of the 13 candidates for mayor, city council, and school board who ran in contested races. This included all seven of the Clean Elections candidates and 5 of the 6 privately funded candidates. In this section, we include a sample of what those candidates had to say about their reasons for choosing Clean Elections or private funding.

The Clean Elections candidates identified several reasons for using the program. They all had positive things to say about their experience, although they also identified areas for improvement. Candidates often mentioned that the philosophy behind Clean Elections connected to their values, and they appreciated the messages it sent about equal treatment of all voters and avoiding conflicts of interest.

“I really believe it’s an incredible equalizer in which you’re able to get more engagement from the public to get that initial support; to say, ‘yes, we believe in you. We’re gonna give you \$5.’ I think that’s more accessible to a large population. So it’s not dependent solely on people who can just dip in and donate, like, \$500. I just feel like it creates a much larger shared sense of responsibility for the public.”

— Candidate for City Council



“Once I understood the different steps, it really was so much easier, from a financial tracking perspective. It’s so much easier talking to people and asking for money. So having the same for everybody made it easy for me to be able to say, everyone, it doesn’t matter what resources you have. It’s \$5. Even if you want to give more, it’s \$5. And to me, that feels so good, especially for people who don’t have the same amount of resources to draw on. Again, it’s like I’m gonna ask everybody for the same thing so there is no awkwardness, I’m not trying to guess what someone has available. And of course, I want to allow them to say no, it just feels like you’re able to ask everyone that same question. There is no hierarchy, there is no, Well, I think maybe you could do \$500 or, I think maybe you could do five, everybody’s the same.” — Candidate for City Council

“[Using Clean Elections] seemed like the only responsible thing to do. Truly, it’s logical and ethical, and especially in a time of such deep distrust [of politicians] for very good reasons, right? I didn’t even question.” — Candidate for City Council

“I’ve run municipal campaigns in the past and the best case scenario is always that you wind up looking like you have only a mild appearance of a conflict of interest at some point. Because it’s a small town, so of course, anyone who’s interested enough to donate money to candidates is probably going to be before the city council at some point for something, even if they didn’t know what at the time they were giving me money. So I’m just supportive of the [Clean Elections] program.” — Candidate for Mayor

“On a personal level, I do not like taking big contributions from people because they figure you owe them and they have access and so you have to be polite. And people have agendas, that’s why they give money to politics. I’d rather not owe anyone more than \$5 worth of attention...[also] the optics, it’s good to be seen as someone who is into clean elections, but that’s a secondary thing.” — Candidate for City Council

Several candidates also indicated that the qualifying process helped them connect to voters and develop their campaign pitch.

“I loved the fact that I had to talk to people in person. The fact that I had to start door-knocking in June, had to talk to people about the system and why I wanted to run was important. Knocking doors in June — who does that? You’re asking for 5 dollars, which is not a lot, but for some people it is. It forced me to recognize the economic diversity in the district. For some people it was easy, and others were digging for quarters.”
— Candidate for City Council

“A lot of my canvassing in the past is issue based; I had never canvassed for a candidate. I liked the necessity of coming up with a narrative to talk about why I was running. I honed my acumen in the process. Even prior to knowing you have the dollars, you have to have a narrative in hand about why you are running and why you think you can do the job. It’s different than collecting a signature, when you can say, this is just for the ballot, it doesn’t mean you support me. When you are asking people to part with their cash, people do have to support you.”
— Candidate for School Board

“I got to know people a lot better [by collecting the qualifying contributions]. Because you’re locked in for a good five minutes, at least. And so the community that developed around it, we had really fun opportunities to connect with people about what mattered to them, to teach them a little bit about this new municipal Clean Elections program. And so it kind of was this built in opportunity to connect with folks. I really enjoyed that. I mean, administratively I was annoyed because I was like, every single time I felt like I was closing on a house, depending on if it’s cash or check - the paperwork was annoying. But I just enjoyed that it allowed for moments for people to connect with us or with each other. There were some really nice moments.”
— Candidate for Mayor

Others mentioned that the amount of funding available through Clean Elections was more than they would have been able to raise privately.

“I had run in 2020. I have a lot of friends and family around the country, I’d done a lot of campaigning and had a wide network to go to, but raising enough money to run a viable campaign was impossible. I sent one mailer, which is the most efficient way to communicate, but it pretty much took my whole budget. This time, knowing I was running against a banker who could FAR out-raise me, and who had ties to the people who like to give money to these campaigns, there was no doubt in my mind I would use Clean Elections. It was the only effective way to run.” — Candidate for City Council

For those who chose to run privately financed campaigns, the major reasons were: 1. lack of knowledge about the Clean Elections program, 2. concerns that the process of qualifying for Clean Elections was too burdensome, and 3. the opinion that the program gave too much money to candidates.

“It was my first time running, and I figured I had enough on my plate with just running. I didn’t want to add more to my and my volunteers’ plates when just running for office was work enough. I support Clean Elections, I just didn’t want to add it to my team’s plate.” — Candidate for City Council

“I think having more info about Clean Election funds would have allowed me to make a better choice.” — Candidate for School Board

“I believe in Clean Elections. I’ve always supported [it in] the legislature. But where we’ve made it so cumbersome, I’m afraid the candidate spends more time on satisfying those requisites than actually campaigning on issues. I actually spent all my time talking to people, and we would just say ‘if you can donate, we appreciate it.’” — Candidate for Mayor

“[We switched to privately financed because] it was just very difficult for us to get this number of Clean Elections donations that we had to get. When I was starting out as a first-time candidate, we got into it because we wanted to see if we could help and change things...and that was what we really were excited about, that we were focused on, but we kind of got hit with this wave of like, oh crap, we need this many signatures and this many donations, and figuring out where to go to get them and then how to do that was very, very hard.”
— Candidate for Mayor

“When I decided to run...I announced August 1st, almost 90 days behind [other candidates]. It would have been nearly impossible to get all of the signatures needed to get any reasonable amount. And I may have also given up on the money that I already had. I had \$1,000 from my previous campaign. [Also] out of principle. From the beginning I did say it’s too much money [for mayor].” — Candidate for Mayor

Candidate Feedback on Improvements

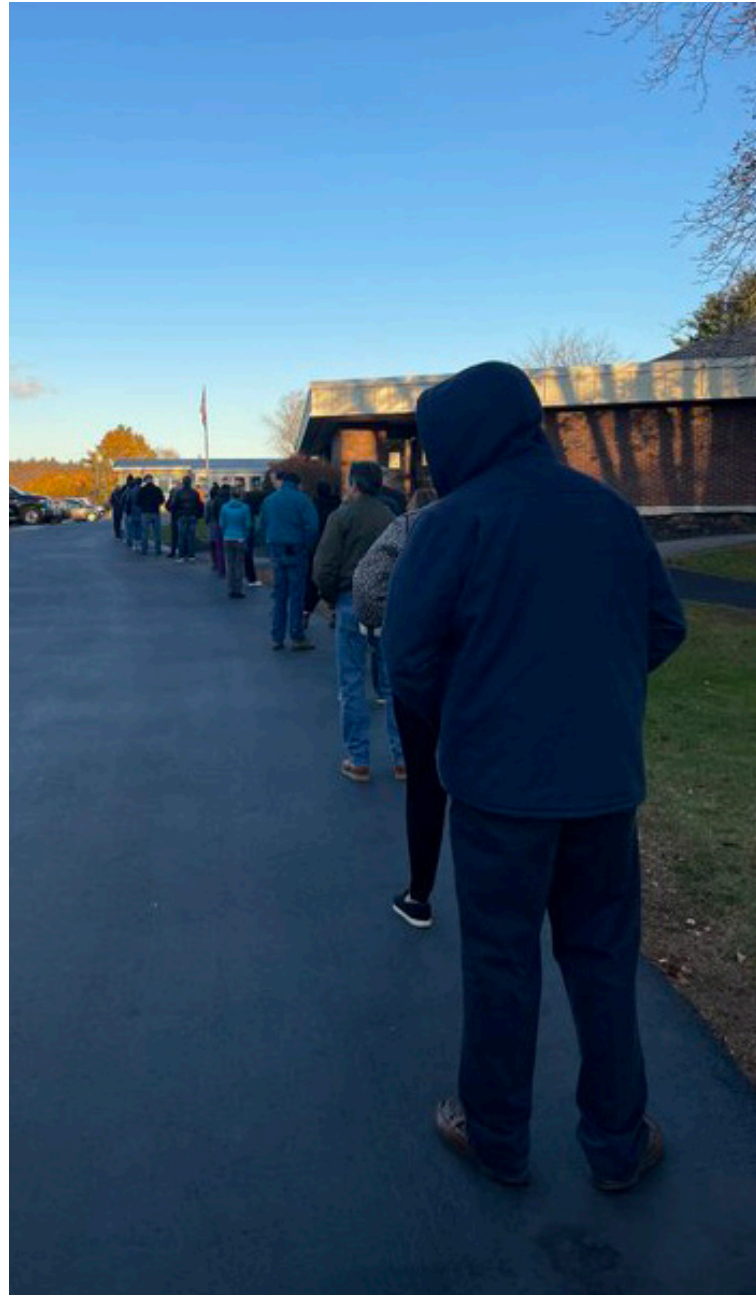
As indicated by several of these comments, both experienced and first-time candidates felt that the paperwork and requirements for Clean Elections were a barrier to their participation. While some of these requirements are linked to key policy goals — ensuring financial accountability and that candidates have significant community support — there is room for improvement to streamline the process. Many candidates had ideas for how to make the system better.

The most important request was to implement an online system for qualifying contributions, as exists at the state level. Candidates noted that the requirement for cash or check payment was burdensome and time-consuming for both the candidate and the voter. There was also the concern that many of the community members Clean Elections is intended to include, particularly younger voters, did not usually carry cash or use checks.

Candidates praised the City Clerk and her staff for their information and support for candidates throughout the process. Many of the specific questions and concerns candidates raised early in the campaigns were resolved as the program was fully implemented. However, many hoped that the rules and processes could be made simpler in the future, perhaps by syncing ballot qualification and Clean Election qualification timelines and forms.

Most Clean Elections candidates felt that they had sufficient funding to run their campaigns and that the ability to qualify for additional funding was important, whether or not they chose to do so themselves. Several noted that the possible amounts for mayor — up to \$100,000 — seemed high given the lower spending in this election cycle.

Several candidates requested that the city allow for additional qualifying contributions to be turned in alongside the initial qualifying and to roll over until candidates had turned in the amount to be certified for the additional funding. Currently, candidates have to turn in the exact number required, and any additional contributions would not be counted toward the next threshold. A roll-over process would match practices at the state level.



IV. Recommendations

Based on the data, candidate interviews, and MCCE's analysis, we make the following recommendations for improvements to the Clean Elections program in Portland.

For the Council



Amend the ordinance to account for inflation.

The disbursement amounts for candidates are not currently adjusted for inflation every year. If unaddressed, this will become a serious long-term problem as it will slowly diminish the ability of candidates to campaign as the prices of goods and services increase. We strongly recommend that the ordinance be amended to adjust the disbursement amounts based on inflation every year, potentially using the same mechanism that is used to adjust the Mayor's salary every year for the cost of living.



Allocate a stable amount of funding for the Clean Elections Fund in each year's budget.

To save up for expensive Mayoral elections every four years, it is recommended that the Clean Elections Fund receive annual appropriations, as anticipated in the ordinance, to "top up" the fund. Regular smaller appropriations will alleviate the need for sudden, headline-grabbing cash infusions before Mayoral election years.



Roll over valid contributions & signatures between funding rounds.

Candidates were inconvenienced by the fact that valid signatures over the required thresholds were not carried forward into the next funding round's qualifying pool. We strongly recommend that the Clerk validate all signatures for funding rounds and allow them to roll over to the next round when one round has been completed. If necessary, the ordinance should be amended to effect this change.

For the Clerk



Allow for online contributions & signatures.

Based on candidate feedback, it is clear that voters and candidates both would like an online method to donate and submit signatures. We believe that this should be considered a top priority, as it would dramatically improve ease of use of the program, and reduce the need for manual data entry in the City Clerk's office. We are encouraged to see that this change is already underway.



Required by the Charter: Build an online searchable database.

The Charter and the enabling ordinance require that the City Clerk “establish a searchable, online, and publicly accessible database of all information included in all registrations and campaign finance reports filed with the City Clerk.” To date, this has not been completed. Data transparency is critical to the functioning of the program. We encourage the City Clerk to seek out the advice of technologists in the City for ways to make the project more feasible and to collaborate with organizations like MCCE and the League of Women Voters to bring this project to fruition. For this report, MCCE volunteers entered data from PDF campaign filings and the full data is available to the public [here](#).



Create informational flyers for voters in multiple languages

Some candidates reported that voters were sometimes unaware of, or unfamiliar with, the Clean Elections program, in particular with voters for whom English was not their first language. To build trust in the program, we recommend that the Clerk create a one-page flier with a high-level description of the Clean Elections program, translate it into the city's major languages, and distribute it to candidates for their communications with voters.

MCCE wishes to thank Ashley Rand and Paige Marchello at the City of Portland, and all of the candidates who shared feedback for this report. Special thanks also to volunteers John Brautigam, Joey Brunelle, Phil Cook, Ann Luther, Alison Smith, Meghan Smith, and Maria Testa for their research and editorial support. This report was written by Anna Kellar and designed by Jen Lancaster.



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