



## **People-Powered Democracy in Baltimore County**

**By Molly Babbin, May 2021**

*Maryland PIRG's Emily Scarr and Ballot Committee Chair Samay Kindra share the story, strategies, and significance of the campaign for public financing of Baltimore County elections.*

This past November, voters in Baltimore County, Maryland approved [Question A](#)—a ballot initiative to create a public financing option for local elections. Currently, most political candidates in the United States fundraise privately, soliciting donations from individuals and often larger entities such as PACs, corporations, and unions. [Public financing](#) allows candidates to remain competitive without taking large contributions through utilizing a public fund that matches small campaign donations. The passage of Question A in Baltimore County amends the County Charter to allow the creation of a Citizens' Election Fund. Candidates for the Baltimore County Council and County Executive will be able to utilize this fund beginning in 2026.

Amid overlapping crises that have become increasingly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, grassroots efforts give communities hope and energy to call for meaningful change. Deepening economic inequality, systemic racism, and the

failure to protect essential workers have led many Americans to demand transformative changes to the way power works in our society. Many point to our economic system as a root cause of these issues, where powerful wealth holders and corporations hoard more and more wealth at the expense of workers and communities.

The [Citizens United](#) and [McCutcheon](#) Supreme Court decisions have reinforced this pattern: They allow corporations and special interest groups to spend unlimited funds on elections and virtually eliminate the aggregate limit that donors can spend on candidates. Wealthy donors and corporations therefore have an outsized influence on elections, skewing political power toward the interests of the wealthy and away from the needs of communities.

Grassroots efforts, such as the movement for public election financing in Baltimore County, are critical first steps toward shifting the power to fund campaigns, run for office, and shape political priorities to the communities that the government serves.

The passage of Question A in Baltimore County is part of a state-wide movement for campaign finance reform. In 2013, Maryland passed legislation to allow counties to set up public financing programs for local elections. Montgomery County took the lead on creating their own program, and several other counties have since followed suit. In fact, Baltimore County's Johnny Olszewski was one of the first Executive level public officials to prioritize the initiative in his campaign. Emily Scarr, Director of the advocacy organization Maryland PIRG, noted, "Baltimore County was one of the first times where a County Executive said, 'I want to do this, come help me do this.'" After winning

the seat as County Executive, Olszewski led legislative efforts to send the Charter Amendment to voters for approval. This move was supported by County Council members and several grassroots organizations, including Scarr at [Maryland PIRG](#).

Once the issue was on the ballot, grassroots advocates formed a Ballot Committee to support its passage. The Ballot Committee was chaired by Samay Kindra, a student at Maryland Law who had worked on Olszewski's campaign as a college student. Kindra explained that he learned about campaign finance reform for the first time in a conversation with Olszewski before deciding to support his campaign. "It became something that was important to me, and a big reason why I stayed with that campaign for so long," Kindra explained. "And I was really excited to be there when he won because I knew this was something we were going to accomplish."

As Chair of the Ballot Committee, Kindra harnessed the vast knowledge held by the Committee's grassroots organization representatives, with their significant experience advancing the state-wide movement for public campaign financing. Kindra felt his goal was to harmonize the efforts of the various groups who had been working on the issue for years. In fact, Scarr noted that while the initiative in Baltimore County was pushed by the County Executive, "it's important to know that it came after seeing a movement across the state and the overwhelming grassroots support of folks actually voting at the ballot to do this. This movement allowed our elected officials that [thought] it made smart policy and political sense to lead with the issue."

While the details of the public financing program are expected to be finalized in Fall 2021, Scarr and Kindra describe the basic framework as follows:

Starting in 2026, any candidate for the Baltimore County Council and County Executive will be able to use the Citizens' Election Fund to help finance their campaign. In order to use the fund, candidates must abide by a strict set of fundraising requirements. They can only accept small contributions, and campaign donors must be individuals, rather than larger entities such as corporations and PACs. Once they hit qualifying requirements for the number of donors reached and amount of money raised, the candidates will receive matching funds for small donations from County residents, with the smallest contributions matched at the highest rate. Therefore, use of the fund allows candidates who only seek small donations to remain competitive with candidates who accept corporate and other large contributions.

The new program represents a step toward redistributing political and decision-making power away from wealthy donors and back to the communities that the government is accountable to serve. Scarr explained, "right now, because of the Supreme Court decisions in our current system, candidates are encouraged to raise as much money as possible as quickly as possible from whomever possible." As political contributions in Maryland have been increasing, politicians turn to large donors to remain competitive. In Maryland, corporations have the right to write checks to elected officials. This has a critical impact on the decisions of elected officials: They are more likely to support policies that benefit corporate donors, which frequently undermine and conflict with the needs of the communities they were chosen to represent.

In the current system, explained Kindra, average voters "feel like they have no reason to be listened to, because their money isn't going to be asked for. The

\$20 they can donate is nothing compared to the \$1,000 you can get in a five-minute conversation with the developer down the street.” He noted that this “not only discourages folks from donating money, but discourages them from even paying attention, or even caring about what's going on, because they just feel like their voices are drowned out.”

With the new Citizen’s Election Fund, participating candidates are incentivized to collect as many small donations as possible. Therefore, they spend more time knocking on doors and raising money in the local community. While the current system motivates candidates to only ask the most regular voters and donors for contributions, the public financing system will encourage candidates to knock on every door, including those who typically do not vote or donate. This can drive up civic participation. Those who have been disengaged from local politics will be more likely to take part in one-to-one conversations with candidates.

In fact, in 2018, Montgomery County was the first county in Maryland to carry out an election using the new public financing program. During the campaign, candidates that used the public fund increased outreach to neighborhoods that had been previously ignored during election cycles, such as BIPOC and low-income communities. The winner of the County Executive race used the public financing option, despite competition from independently financed and large donor candidates.

The Citizen’s Election Fund also redistributes decision-making power through widening the pool of possible candidates. In the dominant system, only those who have political connections and wealth can raise the vast amounts of

money required to run a competitive campaign. To Kindra, eliminating these barriers feels personal. “In all the spaces that I've been in politics, I have never found anyone that looks like me,” he explained. “My dad came here from India. My mom is first generation herself... we don't have any great political connections.” Kindra reflected on his realization that if he wanted to run for office, he would not know where he would find the money to fund a campaign: “The cost of running a campaign to folks who don't come from that background, like if you're a first or second generation American, or if you don't know the big dollar donors, just seems insurmountable.”

The coalition of organizations running the campaign for Question A faced the challenge of adapting their typical strategy to the public health and social distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scarr noted that because public financing is complicated to describe, “we often prioritize longer one-on-one conversations or small group conversations. None of that was an option.” Instead of door-knocking, attending public events, and hosting gatherings, the coalition utilized media, yard signs, and Zoom to spread the word. Their strategy was what Scarr called “grasstops organizing”: They held trainings and conversations with community groups and leaders, requesting that they become ambassadors to the ballot question. Kindra called these community leaders “super-spreaders,” to utilize a phrase popularized by the pandemic, describing how the leaders would share what they learned about Question A with their listservs, communities, and families.

Opt-in public financing programs are popular among people from all political parties, Kindra and Scarr explained, when they understand how the

voluntary program works. The greatest challenge, therefore, was ensuring that constituents understood the program, as the coalition feared that lack of understanding, rather than direct opposition, would be more likely to lead people to vote *no*.

Scarr's greatest advice to activists pushing for public financing and other democracy reforms in their communities is to build understanding through substantive conversations with constituents. She said, "try not to ram it down people's throats. Build actual genuine support from everyone, because everyone can be a supporter.... And activists shouldn't take anything for granted. Even if people have concerns, it doesn't mean they're not winnable on this."

In the face of widespread mistrust and deep inequities in America's political system, county-level reforms may feel like a small-scale solution to a massive issue. Compared to national politics, county-level changes can have the most visible and direct impact on people's day-to-day lives. Public financing can increase two-way conversations with candidates and participation in local government. In fact, it can also influence local policies, which also directly impact residents' lives. "In many ways," Scarr noted, "some of these large and corporate donors have even more influence at the local level where zoning decisions are made." Therefore, as candidates who participate in the program are less likely to be swayed by corporate interests, they are more likely to enact policies accountable to community members. Local policies can change what is politically possible, increasing the likelihood that similar policies will be enacted at a larger scale.

Ultimately, the Baltimore County public financing program is part of a national movement for change. According to Kindra, “it's really hard to start at the top. But it's not as hard to start at the bottom. It's all about giving power back to the people. And so if you start at the most grassroots levels, you can see the most change happen.” County-level programs have already begun to motivate larger-scale change. In her work at Maryland PIRG, Scarr has seen activists in Montgomery County ask for the program to be expanded to school boards and even state-wide offices.

In fact, five months after the passage of Question A, the Maryland legislature passed the [Maryland Fair Elections Act](#): Among other changes, this Act will create stricter fundraising requirements for those participating in the state’s public financing program for gubernatorial candidates, capping donations at \$250, and ensuring all donors are in-state and individuals. Overall, Kindra explained, “the importance of pushing at the local level is that it builds more case examples of it working. And the more examples of it working that we can show, the easier it is to justify it at higher levels.”

The movement for a representative and accountable government also aligns deeply with other movements for change. Kindra spelled out the wider impact of democracy reforms on tackling other significant issues present in society, such as climate change and systemic racism. “If everyday people are able to better represent themselves through their donations, and through their support,” he explained, “candidates are not going to be beholden to the larger entities out there. They're going to be beholden to their next-door neighbor, who understands that we've got to do something to change the way we think about



energy in this country, or change the way that we think about racial justice in this country.”

Addressing the root causes of issues like climate and racial justice requires a reckoning with power; efforts like Baltimore County’s campaign for public financing are tangible steps toward returning power to communities to make decisions that meaningfully address the social and environmental inequities of our time. “That’s really the power that democracy movements have,” Kindra said of the shift in political influence from corporations toward everyday people. “The power is in flipping the narrative.”