

Senate Elections Committee – Feb. 2, 2023 – Dear Chair Carlson and members – (S.F. 3 - Democracy Dollars) - from George Beck

What if we could reduce the influence of big contributors, encourage more people to run for office, encourage candidates to look to the full electorate, increase the number of voters, encourage the media to follow all candidates, and give everyday people a bigger voice in Minnesota elections. In short, create a more participatory and more representative democracy in our state. Does this sound like a pipe dream? Maybe not. The future of campaign finance reform at present is at the state level.

Here's one existing idea. The City of Seattle has adopted a "democracy voucher" program under which eligible residents are provided with four \$25 vouchers that they can send to one or more candidates in municipal elections. The program also includes campaign spending limits for candidates that choose to participate. Candidates are also limited to \$250 of non-vendor funds from any individual contributor. Donations in Seattle increased by 51% and the number of donors increased by 250%. Seattle voters chose to fund this program through a property tax that amounts to an additional tax of approximately \$11.50 per year. This idea is also being discussed in several other cities.

Senator Bolden's S.F. 3 contains a similar democracy dollar program with the same benefits. This bill would provide two \$25 coupons to each voter to contribute to a favored candidate. The bill applies the same rules as the existing political refund program, which is repealed in this bill. A big advantage is that a voter would no longer have to come up with \$50 to participate. Campaign spending is limited as are candidate contributions to a campaign. Improved public financing is the single most important change leading to impacting the corruption cause by huge private contributions to political campaigns.

This public financing program can have big results. Providing democracy dollars to voters will increase the likelihood that they will vote and also become involved in campaigns. It will counteract the cynicism voters feel about being able to actually affect elections with the current reliance on big contributors. Perceptions of unequal influence reduce electoral engagement. All voters would become equally valuable and candidates would target their appeals more broadly. It will encourage an effective democracy in Minnesota.

Please approve this proposal that is supported by Clean Elections Minnesota.

(George Beck is a Board member of Clean Elections Minnesota, a non-partisan non-profit organization.)