



# BIG MONEY OUT VA

“DEMOCRACY LOSES WHEN BIG MONEY WINS”

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## Citizens Report Calls for Legislation to Address Virginia’s Weak and Ineffective Campaign Finance Laws

**RICHMOND, VA**--2022 marked another year of lost opportunity for campaign finance reform in Virginia. Decrying this continued inaction, the non-partisan group BigMoneyOutVA released an updated version of its [“Citizens Report on the Need for Campaign Finance Reform in Virginia.”](#) This report provides a comprehensive review of the history and status of Virginia’s campaign finance laws, highlights best practices by other states, summarizes the status of bills introduced in the 2022 General Assembly, and provides a roadmap for legislative action.

Nearly three decades after Governor Wilder issued his Commission Report on “Campaign Finance Reform, Government Accountability and Ethics,” Virginia remains a pay-to-play state and a national outlier in terms of its campaign finance laws. In a blog post just last year, Governor Wilder noted that the “one-word definition of politics is money, which unfortunately limits participation--unless you have got big bucks<sup>1</sup>”.

As noted in the Report, only marginal reforms have been made to the Commonwealth’s campaign finance system since the Wilder report was released in 1994. Despite the discussions of the 2021 Joint Sub-Committee of Campaign Finance Reform, and the subsequent introduction of nearly two dozen campaign finance bills during the 2022 General Assembly session, only three modest bills passed the gauntlet of legislative scrutiny to become laws. These included:

- an oversight bill (HB 492) obliging campaigns to retain campaign finance records and allowing the Department of Elections to undertake review, with delayed implementation in 2024;
- a disclosure bill (HB 125) which imposes civil penalties on sponsors violating political campaign advertisement disclosure laws; and
- a resolution (HJ 53) extending the mandate of the Sub-Committee to examine opportunities for reform.

Legislators have only recently decided to re-convene the [Joint Sub-Committee](#), scheduling its first meeting December 12<sup>th</sup>. This delayed move which doesn’t allow substantive discussions before the next General Assembly seems to reveal our elected officials’ disregard for the need to improve Virginia’s standards of accountability and conduct for public servants.

Nancy Morgan, coordinator of BigMoneyOutVA, lamented: “Virginia legislators seem oblivious to the fact that the general public’s confidence in government is eroded by the perception that their legislators

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wildervisions.com/2021/08/23/money-in-politics/> [punctuation added for clarity]

engage in ‘pay-to-play’ politics”. A poll undertaken last year by the Wason Center<sup>2</sup> showed that nearly four out of five Virginians, irrespective of political party, think that large donors have too much influence in our elections. Virginia citizens are fed up with the Commonwealth’s lack of dollar limits on campaign donations. The fact that legislators can legally spend these dollars on personal and family expenses is blatantly unethical. In addition, 88% of voters agreed with the need for complete campaign finance disclosure.”

As Governor Wilder once wryly noted, “those called upon to pass legislation for funding limits are compromised, thus, the continuing inequitable state of affairs persists.” OpenSecrets<sup>3</sup> data showed this inequity in the 2021 gubernatorial race, one of the most expensive in the country, where donations exceeding \$10,000 accounted for an estimated three quarters of all contributions. Only 1,124 individuals/entities contributed 71% of money going into this election. Most donors, 83% of them, contributed \$500 or less to candidates, yet their contributions account for only 8% of total contributions.

Delegate David Bulova, sponsor of the resolutions convening the Sub-Committee on Campaign Finance Reform and champion of the oversight bill passed earlier this year, expressed disappointment that Virginia legislators are slow to improve our campaign finance laws. He added that, “We have a special responsibility as public servants to ensure that our citizens have confidence in our campaign finance system. Virginia has among the weakest campaign finance laws in the nation. Further, the spiraling cost of campaigning serves as a strong barrier to otherwise qualified people running for public office. Improving oversight and accountability has bi-partisan support and is a win for both Virginia citizens and legislators.” Trevor Potter, President, and founder of the Campaign Legal Center further highlighted that: “Virginians and voters nationwide have a right to know who is spending big money to influence our votes and our government”.

With the issuing of this Citizens Report, Morgan, expressed a hope that Virginia legislators will recognize the need for campaign finance reforms to increase the legitimacy and integrity of state government and take up reform legislation in the upcoming 2023 session. “We need to enable our elected officials to better reflect the interests and will of all citizens of the Commonwealth.” To emphasize this message, she encourages Virginia citizens to raise their voices at a [Democracy Day rally](#) to be held in Richmond on January 24<sup>th</sup>. Organized with other democracy groups, like UpVote, FairVoteVA, and Clean Virginia, Virginia good governance advocates will start off this lobbying day at an 8 am rally at the Capital Bell Tower.

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[BigMoneyOutVA](#) is a non-partisan group which champion good governance and transparency in Virginia, while promoting increased public discourse between citizens of the Commonwealth and their legislators. Follow us on Twitter: @MoneyOutVA

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<sup>2</sup> <https://virginiamoneyinpolitics.files.wordpress.com/2022/01/campaign-finance-polling-full.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.followthemoney.org/>