GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-25-106650, a report to congressional committees

December 2024

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Observations on Public Financing Programs in Selected States and Localities

Why GAO Did This Study

While most electoral campaigns are privately financed, 14 states and 26 localities offer programs through which candidates running for state or local offices can use public funds to finance their campaigns, according to a 2024 Brennan Center for Justice report.

The House committee report accompanying the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2023, includes a provision for GAO to revisit and update its 2010 report (GAO-10-390) on public campaign financing programs. This report describes, among other things, (1) key characteristics of public campaign financing programs in selected states and localities; (2) what available data indicate about candidates' use of these programs; and (3) factors affecting candidate participation in these programs.

GAO selected five locations with state and local public campaign financing programs that covered executive and legislative offices, were implemented for at least two election cycles, and represented a mix of program models, among other factors. GAO reviewed relevant laws and documents and interviewed officials to describe key characteristics of the selected programs. GAO also analyzed candidate participation and campaign finance data for these five programs for the two most recent election cycles.

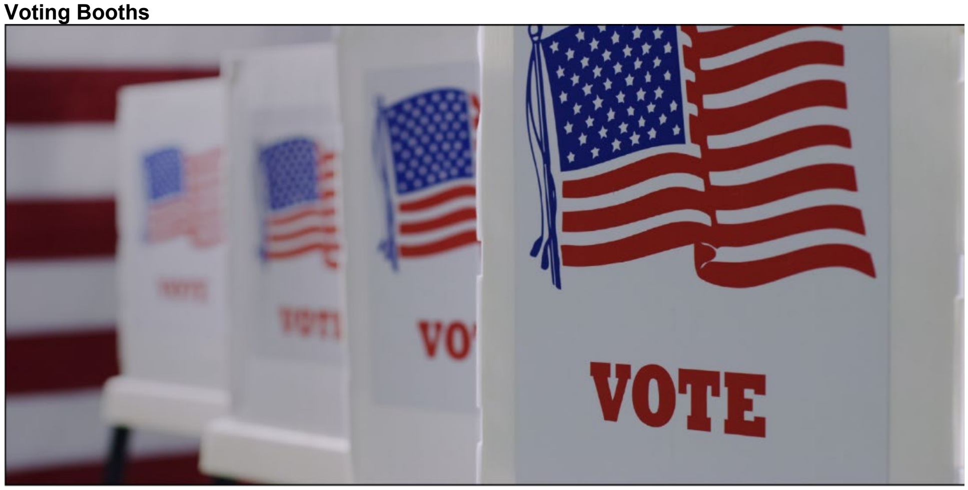
GAO interviewed officials from these five programs and four additional programs—selected using the same criteria—to obtain perspectives on public campaign financing programs. The findings from these interviews are not generalizable, but provide insight into state and local perspectives.

View GAO-25-106650. For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gamblerr@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

States and localities have generally implemented public campaign financing programs using one of three models: (1) grants—participating candidates receive lump-sum grants of public funds; (2) matching funds—participating candidates receive public funds matching certain private contributions they raise, at a set rate; and (3) vouchers—eligible residents receive a credit of public funds they can assign to one or more participating candidates. GAO selected five programs representing the three model types (Arizona; Los Angeles, California; Minnesota; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Seattle, Washington) and examined their characteristics. For example, all five programs have requirements for candidates to qualify for the program, and once qualified, to receive public funds. These requirements include, for example, collecting a specific number of contributions to qualify and then adhering to spending limits to receive public funds.

Voting Booths



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The amount of public funding participating candidates received varied by office sought and location, among other things. For example, in Minnesota in the 2022 election, legislative candidates received an average of $4,716 in public funds, and the one participating gubernatorial candidate received $584,034 in public funds. In Los Angeles in the 2022 election, participating city council candidates received an average of $198,151 in public funds, and participating mayoral candidates received an average of $1,284,158 in public funds.

GAO interviewed officials from the five selected programs and four additional programs (Albuquerque, New Mexico; Hawaii; Maine; and Washington, D.C.) to obtain perspectives on candidate participation. Officials from all nine programs said that many candidates are attracted to the public campaign financing programs because they provide an accessible source of funding. This may be particularly appealing for candidates with limited fundraising experience. Officials from eight of the nine programs said a key reason candidates may not participate is because they perceive the available public funding to be insufficient to run a competitive campaign.