

Testimony of Kathay Feng California Common Cause

My name is Kathay Feng and I am the Executive Director of California Common Cause. Common Cause is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to restoring the core values of American democracy, reinventing an open, honest and accountable government that serves the public interest, and empowering ordinary people to make their voices heard in the political process. We focus on five broad issue areas: elections and voting, money in politics, ethics in government, government accountability, and media and democracy.

Common Cause has a membership base in California of 100,000 people. The issue that rises to the top of people's minds these days is the looming threat of money in politics to flood our political system and drown out the voices of regular people. Our democracy should be based on a marketplace of ideas, where candidates and campaigns can display their solutions and voters can make informed choices after they have done some comparison shopping. Instead, we have a monopoly-place of ideas – where only those with access to money are allowed to have bull-horns, that drown out all exchange of ideas, and provide voters with limited choices.

But here's the thing. Americans are an innovative people. Just this November 2015, we saw the voters of Seattle and Maine adopt reforms aimed at putting the power of choice back in people's hands. In Maine, voters created a system that gives high dollar matches for money raised from small donors. In Seattle, voters will receive vouchers to be able to allocate to the candidates of their choice. Two different approaches, but one message – Our democracy is for We the People.

What do we have here in California? We have a ban on public financing of campaigns that was slipped into an initiative passed in 1988 that masqueraded as campaign finance reform. We do in fact have charter cities that are still free to innovate – Los Angeles being one of about half a dozen that has a matching funds program. In fact, in recent years, Los Angeles has been moving to higher matches that reward fundraising from Angelenos, and require constituent contact – which is slowly bringing a greater diversity of candidates back into the mix.

But California can do better.

California also has the Cal-Access online campaign finance disclosure system. It has cutting edge technology ... for the 1990s. We have a system where finding information is not easy, collecting information requires the creation of a new form, and unless you have the money to hire a specialized campaign finance attorney and treasurer, staying in compliance can be daunting.

California can do better. But to get to a better solution, it means pulling all our tribes together, temporarily putting down the weapons, and working through what would better serve the people. It's not a silver bullet approach. It is a collaborative and deliberative approach, one that thinks about system change holistically. We are excited to have started conversations with both Secretary of State Padilla's office and the Fair Political Practices Commission. We think that everyone is ready to roll up their sleeves and work through the problems.

To that end, Common Cause has been pulling together a working group called PRAM – the Political Reform and Modernization working group.

Political Reform and Modernization Working Group

Who is PRAM?

California Common Cause co-convenes the Political Reform and Modernization (PRAM) Working Group with California Business Roundtable, California Federal of Labor, and California Forward. We have some 30 groups coming to the table, including labor, business, civil rights, environmental, civil rights, and good government groups, such as League of Women Voters, SEIU and California Chamber of Commerce.

We are committed to:

1. A healthy democracy that engages an informed and inclusive electorate;
2. Promoting representative government that have the public's trust and confidence;
3. Modernizing and improving how candidates and campaigns disclose and how voters, the media, and other stakeholders, receive campaign finance information; and
4. Creating an environment that allows campaign finance innovations at the state and local level that promote a diverse candidate pool, robust public debate, and an informed and engaged electorate.

What Are PRAM's Goals?

1. **We support simplifying and clarifying reporting rules, to reduce complexity and confusion.** This includes simplifying the committee reporting categories and synchronizing the reporting requirements.
2. **We support creating a statewide online reporting system that collects and discloses campaign donation information for elections at every level of government, from local to state.**
3. **We support promoting a statewide disclosure system that provides data in a more understandable, user-friendly, and searchable format, removing information from its siloes.** This includes collecting contribution and expenditure data in a format that is data-driven, not form-driven so the public can easily search and third party users (media, governments, campaigns, vendors, non-profits) can easily analyze the data. This will also allow innovation of more user-friendly apps to provide the data to the public. We are exploring the viability of moving to an entity-based system that allows data to be more easily linked over time and into more informative categories.
4. **We support exploring the possibility of integrating reporting campaign finance information and enforcement of campaign finance laws.**
5. **We support removing the state law ban on public financing options to allow innovation at the state and local level.**