Citizens' Election Program

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Issue

Provide an overview of the Citizens' Election Program.

The Office of Legislative Research is not authorized to provide legal opinions and this report should not be considered one.

Summary

The Citizens' Election Program (CEP) is Connecticut's voluntary public campaign financing program. Candidates for statewide or state legislative office may apply to the program, after meeting certain eligibility requirements, to receive grants from the state's Citizens' Election Fund (CEF). These requirements generally include (1) earning a place on the ballot, (2) raising the required amount of qualifying contributions (QCs), and (3) agreeing to certain limitations and additional accountability.

If a candidate receives a grant, it must be used to finance the candidate's campaign. There are multiple types of grants available, including for (1) pre-convention campaigning of candidates for governor, (2) political primaries, (3) the general election, and (4) adjourned primaries or elections. However, by applying for these funds, candidates are generally limited to only spending their grant funds, plus any QCs they raised to be eligible for the grant. Additionally, candidates intending to participate in the program may only take small loans for their campaigns and must repay them before applying for a grant. They are also restricted from taking any loans after applying for a grant. The law also restricts the amount of personal funds that candidates may give their campaigns.

Candidates choose whether they want to participate in CEP. However, once a candidate applies for a CEP grant, they cannot withdraw from the program and remain subject to all CEP requirements for

the remainder of the election cycle (CGS § 9-703(c)). Candidates who opt-in are deemed "participating" candidates. Candidates who do not participate in CEP are deemed "non-participating" candidates and only must follow the state's general campaign finance laws. This report only provides a general overview of the accountability and regulations that CEP imposes. For detailed information regarding CEP, see the State Election Enforcement Commission's (SEEC) 2026 CEP Guide.

Campaign Finance Overview

All candidates, regardless of CEP participation, must follow the state's campaign finance laws (see Chapter 155). These laws generally regulate, among other things, the contributions campaigns may receive, how campaigns may spend them, and how other entities may financially interact with the candidate's campaign.

Generally, under these laws, candidates running for office must form a "committee" that serves as an organizing body for that candidate's campaign. Each candidate committee must have a treasurer that agrees to (1) follow the state's campaign finance laws and (2) account for the committee's expenses and contributions and report as required to SEEC. Generally only the treasurer may authorize expenditures on a committee's behalf (CGS § 9-607(a)).

CEP Program Goals

According to SEEC's 2026 CEP Overview, there are five goals of the CEP program, which are:

1. allowing candidates to compete without relying on special interest money;
2. allowing statewide officers and legislators the ability to make decisions free of the influence of, or the appearance that they have been influenced by, donations from special interests;
3. restoring public confidence in the electoral and legislative processes;
4. increasing meaningful citizen participation; and
5. providing the public with useful and timely disclosure of campaign finances.

Eligibility

Under state law, candidates for statewide office (governor, lieutenant governor, treasurer, attorney general, secretary of the state, and comptroller) and the state legislature may be eligible to receive CEP grants. In order to be eligible for CEP, a candidate must (1) certify that he or she is participating, (2) raise the required amount of qualifying contributions, (3) return all contributions that are not eligible QCs, (4) agree to CEP's expenditure limits, and (5) apply for and be approved for a grant (CGS § 9-702(a) & (b)). Some of these requirements are implemented differently depending on whether the candidate is a major or minor party candidate (see below).

Additionally, candidates are not eligible for a grant if they were convicted of or pled guilty or no contest to certain election-related or public-office related crimes (CGS § 9-706(a)(5)).

Ballot Eligibility

The secretary of the state's office is responsible for overseeing ballot eligibility. In order to receive a grant for a primary, the candidate must have (1) received their party's endorsement, (2) received at least 15% of the vote on at least one round of voting at the convention, or (3) successfully petitioned onto the primary ballot (see Chapter 153 of the state statutes for more information on these procedures). If the candidate is not subject to a primary, they are ineligible for a primary grant.

Similarly, a candidate is eligible for a general election grant if (1) they are their party's only candidate on the ballot and therefore no primary will occur; (2) after a primary, they are declared their party's nominee for the general election; or (3) they are approved as a petitioning candidate (see below).

Additionally, once a candidate applies for a grant, he or she becomes ineligible for any future grant that election cycle if he or she changes party status (for example, switching parties) (CGS § 9-706(a)).

Qualifying Contributions

As discussed above, to receive a CEP grant, a candidate must qualify for the program by collecting enough QCs to show a certain level of support for their campaign before receiving public funding for it. A qualifying contribution is a donation of a certain dollar amount from an eligible donor (as certain people are prohibited from donating as discussed below). QCs must also come with sufficient documentation so that SEEC can verify the QCs' eligibility under state law.

Under state law, to be a QC, a donor must contribute at least $5 and no more than $250 dollars, but the $250 maximum is adjusted for inflation each election cycle. In 2026, the maximum inflation-adjusted amount a donor may give is $340. If a donor gives more than the maximum, the campaign must return the excess to them.

The thresholds a candidate must meet depend on the office they are running for. All candidates must raise a certain dollar amount, but candidates for statewide office must also ensure that a certain dollar amount is donated by Connecticut residents. Relatedly, legislative candidates must ensure a minimum number of QC donors live in towns the district represents (regardless of the total dollar amount).

These dollar amounts are also adjusted for inflation and rounded to specified increments for each election cycle (the number of in-district donors for legislative candidates is not adjusted). Table 1 below shows the 2026 thresholds that candidates must reach after the inflationary adjustments (the unadjusted base amounts are in parentheses).

Table 1: 2026 CEP QC Fundraising Thresholds

Office	Overall Donations	Minimum Number of In-Town Donors	Donations from State Residents
Governor	$335,500 ($250,000)	Not Required	$302,000 ($225,000)
Other Statewide Office	$100,700 ($75,000)	Not Required	$90,600 ($67,500)
State Senator	$20,100 ($15,000)	300	Not Required
State Representative	$6,700 ($5,000)	150	Not Required

Special elections for legislative offices have their own thresholds not discussed here. Additionally, SEEC recommends candidates raise "buffer" QCs in case some QCs are disqualified, which might put a candidate below these thresholds and prevent them from receiving a grant until they obtain additional QCs. However, any eligible QCs raised in excess of the thresholds above must be donated to the CEF.

Contributions do not qualify if they (1) are in-kind donations, such as goods or services donated to the committee; (2) exceed the allowable maximum (but funds up to the maximum are still eligible); (3) lack the required documentation; or (4) come from ineligible donors. There are numerous types of ineligible donors (such as entities that are not people like political committees or corporations), but state law specifically prohibits QCs:

1. from "principals" of current and prospective state contractors (such as presidents or board members of companies with contracts with the executive or legislative branches),

2. below the $5 minimum amount,

3. from individuals who did not provide their full name and address,

4. from out-of-state individuals if it exceeds the limit on out-of-state donations for candidates to statewide office, and

5. from youth under 12 years old.

Disqualified QCs must be returned to the donor or donated to a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit (CGS § 9-704, as amended by PA 25-26).

State law has further restrictions on who may make contributions to candidates, regardless of CEP participation (for example, CGS § 9-610, CGS § 9-611, CGS § 9-612, and CGS § 9-622; see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide for more information).

Application

Once a candidate has qualified for ballot access and raised enough QCs, the campaign must submit an application with (1) a completed application form (SEEC Form CEP 15); (2) a sworn accounting of all funds and expenditures (SEEC Form 30); (3) copies of documentation on each QC (for example, signed QC certification forms); (4) certain information on online contributions, if collected; and (5) a committee check to the CEF for any excess contributions. If they have not already been submitted, the campaign must also submit (1) an affidavit agreeing to abide by CEP's expenditure limits and other program requirements (SEEC Form CEP 10; see below), (2) an electronic funds transfer form (SEEC Form CEP 12), and (3) proof of ballot access.

The application form must include certifications that (1) they have raised the necessary QCs, returned any ineligible contributions, and transmitted excess contributions to the CEF; (2) all loans to the campaign are repaid; (3) the campaign treasurer will comply with certain campaign finance and CEP laws and regulations; (4) they will deposit grant funds into the campaign's account; (5) they will return any unspent funds; (6) any civil penalties or forfeitures levied against the candidate committee or treasurer are paid except for those recently imposed against the committee; and (7) the candidate or treasurer has not been convicted or has not pled guilty or no contest to certain crimes.

State law outlines when an application must be submitted and SEEC's deadlines for reviewing an application and paying out grants. SEEC must review each QC, the candidate's ballot eligibility, and the application. If approved, SEEC determines the amount of the grant the candidate will receive (see below) (CGS § 9-706, as amended by PA 25-26).

SEEC may continue (hold over) an application to give a campaign time to fix any identified mistakes. Alternatively, if SEEC denies the application, the campaign must decide whether to continue in the program without a grant or withdraw.

For a complete checklist of the application process, see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, pages 59-63.

Grants

Under CEP, candidates may be eligible for up to four different grants for (1) convention campaigns, (2) primaries, (3) the general election, and (4) adjourned primaries or elections. All grant amounts are adjusted for inflation each election cycle (CGS §§ 9-702(a) & 9-705). Once a campaign receives grant funds into its committee account, generally no other contributions, loans, or personal funds can be deposited into it except other grant funds (CGS § 9-707).

Convention Campaign Grant

Eligible major party gubernatorial candidates may qualify for a "convention campaign grant." These grants allow these candidates to use public funds to campaign for their party's nomination before the party's convention for choosing its gubernatorial nominee. Importantly, candidates do not need to prove ballot access to receive this grant (as they are campaigning for a nomination to be placed on the ballot).

The base grant amount under state law is $806,875 (CGS § 9-705(a)(1)) and the 2026 inflation-adjusted amount is $937,588.75. Gubernatorial candidates who receive this grant and qualify for a primary grant (see below) will have their primary grant amount reduced by how much they were given through a convention grant (essentially, the convention grant is a partial advance of the primary grant).

Primary Grant

According to SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, "[a]fter the party conventions, caucuses, or town committee meetings are held to endorse a party candidate, the secretary of the state certifies which candidates will face primary contests. To be eligible for a primary grant, the candidate must qualify for a place on the ballot pursuant to state election laws and the primary must be scheduled." The amount of the grant varies based on the office sought, as shown in Table 2 below (the unadjusted base amount is shown in parentheses).

Table 2: 2026 Primary Grant Amounts

Office	Overall Donations
Governor (no convention grant)	$3,750,355 ($3,227,500)
Governor (received convention grant)	$2,812,766.25 ($2,420,625)
Other Statewide Office	$562,875 ($375,000)
State Senator	$54,005 ($35,000)
State Representative	$15,430 ($10,000)

Legislative candidates in "party-dominant districts" qualify for an enhanced primary grant. Party-dominant districts are those where the percentage of enrolled voters for one party in the district exceeds the other major party by at least 20%. These enhanced grants are offered because the winner of the dominant party's primary has a strong likelihood of being elected in that district, so campaigning for the party's nomination has a greater impact on the candidate's chances than campaigning during the general election. The 2026 inflation-adjusted grant amounts, and the statutory base amounts, are shown in Table 3 to the right.

Table 3: 2026 Party-Dominant Primary Grant Amounts

Office	Overall Donations
State Senator	$115,725 ($75,000)
State Representative	$38,575 ($25,000)

In either case, a candidate's general election grant is reduced by (1) any unspent primary grant funds and (2) the value of any items purchased for the primary the candidate plans to use for the general election (CGS § 9-705(i)).

General Election Grant

If a candidate qualifies for ballot access for the general election, the candidate may apply for a general election grant (CGS § 9-708). If a candidate previously received a primary grant and qualifies for the general election ballot, he or she must instead file additional documentation proving grant eligibility.

The grant amount varies based on the office sought. A candidate who submits a good-faith application at least 70 days before the election receives the full grant amount they are entitled to. If the candidate files after this deadline, the grant amount is reduced to a certain percentage of the full grant based on when the candidate applies, ranging from 40-75% (CGS § 9-705).

Major Party Candidates. The grant amount for major party candidates may be further reduced depending on the opposition faced in the general election. If the candidate has no opponent, he or she will only receive 30% of the grant they are otherwise entitled to. If a candidate is opposed only by a minor party or petitioning opponent who has not raised the required QCs for CEP participation, then the candidate only receives 60% of the grant they are otherwise entitled to (CGS § 9-705(i)).

Therefore, a major party candidate's general election grant amount depends on (1) the office sought, (2) how close to the general election he or she applies, and (3) the opposition faced (CGS § 9-705). To determine what grant amount a candidate would receive, see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, pages 67-69.

Minor Party and Petitioning Candidates. Minor party candidates receive the full grant amount if their party had a candidate (1) for the same office, (2) in the same district, and (3) that received at least 20% of vote in the last election. Candidates who petition their way onto the general election ballot may also receive a full grant if they received signatures from a number of people equal to at least 20% of the votes cast for that office in the last election.

If these candidates have not met the required threshold to receive a full grant, the grant is reduced to a certain percentage of the full grant based on meeting lower thresholds of the same requirements (specifically, (1) the applicable minor party's candidate in the last election receiving at least 10% or 15% of the vote or (2) the petitioning candidate getting signatures from a number of voters equaling at least 10% or 15% of the applicable votes cast). Candidates who do not meet the lowest threshold are ineligible for grants. See Table 4 to the right for specific reduction and threshold requirements (CGS § 9-705(c) & (g)).

Table 4: Minor Party or Petitioning Grant Percentage

Threshold	Grant Percentage
20%	Full grant
15%	2/3 of a full grant
10%	1/3 of a full grant

Therefore, a minor party candidate's general election grant amount depends on (1) the office sought, (2) how close to the general election he or she applies, and (3) meeting the threshold requirement. To determine what grant amount a candidate would receive, see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, pages 69-72.

If these candidates do not receive the full grant amount, they may raise additional contributions (subject to the existing QC requirements discussed above) to make up the difference between what they received and the full grant amount (CGS § 9-702(c)(1)).

Special Elections. If a special election occurs for a state legislative office, eligible candidates may apply for a CEP grant generally as they would for a general election grant. However, the QC threshold is reduced to 75% of the general election requirement and alternative deadlines apply (CGS §§ 9-703(a), 9-704(a)(5) & 9-706(g)(2)).

Adjourned Primary or Election

If there is another primary or election due to a tie vote or a court order, candidates may be eligible for a supplemental grant that varies in amount based on the office sought (CGS § 9-705). See SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, pages 72 & 73, for more information.

Limitations

Because CEP uses public funds to cover a candidate's campaign costs, all campaign expenditures must be made to promote the candidate's nomination or election. The treasurer (or the deputy treasurer during the treasurer's absence or disability) is the only individual who may authorize or make any committee expenditures, except for certain expenses paid for by a candidate with his or her personal funds (CGS § 9-607(a)). Funds may not be used for, among other things, (1) personal use; (2) payments to a candidate, their family, or any of their businesses; (3) contributions to other committees; (4) gifts; or (5) payments for goods and services not at market value. For more information about unallowed expenditures, see Conn. Agencies Regs., § 9-706-1 et seq.

Personal Funds and Loans

Candidates may only take up to $1,000 in loans for a campaign. The loans must be repaid before a candidate applies for a CEP grant, otherwise the candidate is ineligible (CGS § 9-710(a) & (b)).

Similarly, candidates are limited in the personal funds they may donate to their campaign. The amount varies by the office sought, as shown in Table 5 to the right (CGS § 9-710(c)). Any personal funds provided reduce the grant amount a candidate receives by the same amount (CGS § 9-705(i)(1)). Further, personal funds may only be donated to the campaign before any application for a CEP grant.

Table 5: Personal Fund Limits

Office	Overall Donations
Governor	$20,000
Other Statewide Office	$10,000
State Senator	$2,000
State Representative	$1,000

Expenditures

Agreement. All candidates for statewide or legislative office, regardless of their CEP participation, generally must submit an affidavit to SEEC indicating whether or not they agree to follow CEP's expenditure limits. They must generally do so at least (1) 25 days before a primary or (2) 40 days before the election, as applicable. If they agree to follow the expenditure limits, the candidate's submission must include written certifications from the candidate and the treasurer agreeing to comply with other CEP requirements (for example, that the candidate will repay funds used for unauthorized expenses) (CGS § 9-703).

Limits. Before a primary campaign (if there is one) or a general election campaign (if there is no primary), candidates may generally only spend what they have raised in allowable QCs plus any allowable personal funds. However, major party gubernatorial candidates who receive a convention campaign grant are instead limited to spending their allowable QCs and personal funds plus the amount of the grant during this period.

For the primary and general election periods, a candidate's expenditure limit increases to the amount of any CEP grant funds the candidate is given plus any unspent money from earlier grants, QCs, and personal funds (CGS § 9-702(c)).

Penalties. If a campaign exceeds the expenditure limits, it must file a declaration of excess expenditures with SEEC within 24 or 48 hours of making the excess expenditure, depending on how close to the primary or election it was made (CGS § 9-712). Exceeding these limits generally results in the candidate being ineligible for any further CEP grants for the remainder of the election cycle. Additionally, state law allows for other penalties, such as being personally liable for the excess expenditures and a fine imposed by SEEC. SEEC may waive or modify these penalties if it determines the violation was minor (CGS § 9-711; see Conn. Agencies Regs., § 9-711-1 for more information).

Post-Election. Candidates are also limited to making modest post-election expenditures for routine activities involving minor costs associated with winding up a campaign and responding to a post-election review such as (1) moving expenses from the campaign office; (2) costs for complying with a post-election review; or (3) thank you notes, subject to certain limits depending on the office sought (see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, page 87, for more information).

In-Kind Expenditures. Candidates are prohibited from receiving in-kind contributions, which, according to SEEC, are donations of goods, services, or anything of value given free of charge or at less than the usual charge (CGS § 9-601a(a)). This does not prohibit a candidate from paying for the good or service at its normal value and documenting it as an expenditure.

Coordinated Expenditures. CEP prohibits receiving contributions above the QC threshold. This includes coordinated expenditures, which are ones made with the consent, coordination, or consultation of a candidate or their agent, but financed by another source (for example, working with another person who will pay for and send out a campaign mailing supporting the candidate).

Organization Expenditures. The law also places limitations on "organization expenditures" (CGS § 9-718). Generally, these are expenditures by party committees or certain legislative committees for specific purposes outlined in law (CGS § 9-601(25)). For example, for general election campaigns, these committees may only provide a certain amount of organization expenditures for a legislative candidate (the amount is adjusted for inflation each cycle). For more information, see SEEC's 2026 CEP Guide, pages 90-92.

Reporting and Disclosure

All participating candidates must file periodic campaign finance disclosure statements to provide an accounting of the campaign's finances (SEEC Form 30). If there is at least one participating candidate in a race, then all candidates, regardless of CEP participation, may also have to file weekly supplemental statements within a certain period before an election or primary (CGS § 9-

712), as well as provide SEEC documentation upon request. To help candidates know when they are required to file, SEEC provides filing calendars for each type of committee.

If a candidate is no longer running for office, they must (1) file a termination report using SEEC Form 30 indicating all the candidate's wrapping-up expenditures and (2) give all its surplus funds to the CEF.

Citizens' Election Fund

The CEF is a non-lapsing account, administered by the state treasurer, from which CEP grants are made. The CEF is mostly funded by a statutorily determined amount of proceeds from the state's sale of unclaimed or abandoned property that escheats (reverts) to it (CGS § 3-69a). It also receives money from the following:

1. corporation business tax revenues, but only when there are not enough funds in the CEF to (a) cover the statutorily required annual deposit amount or (b) provide grants in a state election year to candidates participating in CEP (CGS § 9-750, as amended by PA 25-134, § 16);

2. contributions of surpluses from campaign committees, exploratory committees, and certain other committees that dissolve (CGS § 9-608(f));

3. voluntary contributions from individuals, businesses, organizations, party committees, and political committees (CGS § 9-751); and

4. its own investment earnings (CGS § 9-701, as amended by PA 25-110, § 24).

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