

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2025 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

House Bill 3175

By Delegates Ridenour, Butler, Jennings, Mallow,
Hillenbrand, Mazzocchi, Kimble, Marple, Linville,
Martin, and Kump

[Introduced March 06, 2025; referred to the
Committee on the Judiciary]

1 A BILL to amend and reenact §3-8-1a of the Code of West Virginia; to amend said code by
2 adding thereto a new section, designated §3-8-8a; and to amend said code by adding thereto a
3 new section, designated §24-3-2a, all relating to certain contributions by public utilities; providing
4 definition of a public utility; prohibiting public utilities from making contributions from funds derived
5 from rate payers to political candidates or campaigns, political action committees, groups that can
6 make contributions to political candidates, campaigns, or political action committees; creating
7 criminal offense and penalties for violation; and prohibiting charitable contributions by public
8 utilities to charitable organizations.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

CHAPTER 3. ELECTIONS.

ARTICLE 8. REGULATION AND CONTROL OF ELECTIONS.

§3-8-1a.

Definitions.

1 As used in this article, the following terms have the following definitions:

2 (1) "Ballot issue" means a constitutional amendment, special levy, bond issue, local option
3 referendum, municipal charter or revision, an increase or decrease of corporate limits, or any other
4 question that is placed before the voters for a binding decision.

5 (2) "Billboard advertisement" means a commercially available outdoor advertisement,
6 sign, or similar display regularly available for lease or rental to advertise a person, place, or
7 product.

8 (3) "Broadcast, cable, or satellite communication" means a communication that is publicly
9 distributed by a television station, radio station, cable television system, or satellite system.

10 (4) "Candidate" means an individual who:

11 (A) Has filed a certificate of announcement under §3-5-7 of this code or a municipal

12 charter;

13 (B) Has filed a declaration of candidacy under §3-5-23 of this code;

14 (C) Has been named to fill a vacancy on a ballot; or

15 (D) Has declared a write-in candidacy or otherwise publicly declared his or her intention to
16 seek nomination or election for any state, district, county, municipal, or party office to be filled at
17 any primary, general, or special election.

18 (5) "Candidate's committee" means a political committee established with the approval of,
19 or in cooperation with, a candidate or a prospective candidate to explore the possibilities of
20 seeking a particular office or to support or aid his or her nomination or election to an office in an
21 election cycle. If a candidate directs or influences the activities of more than one active committee
22 in a current campaign, those committees shall be considered one committee for the purpose of
23 contribution limits.

24 (6) "Caregiving services" means direct care, protection, and supervision of a child, or other
25 person with a disability or a medical condition, for which a candidate has direct caregiving
26 responsibility. For the purposes of this article, the caregiving service expense incurred shall be in
27 direct connection with the candidate's campaign activities during the current election cycle.

28 (7) "Caucus campaign committee" means a West Virginia House of Delegates or Senate
29 political party caucus campaign committee that receives contributions and makes expenditures to
30 support or oppose one or more specific candidates or slates of candidates for nomination,
31 election, or committee membership.

32 (8) "Clearly identified" means that the name, nickname, photograph, drawing, or other
33 depiction of the candidate appears, or the identity of the candidate is otherwise apparent through
34 an unambiguous reference, such as "the Governor", "your Senator", or "the incumbent", or
35 through an unambiguous reference to his or her status as a candidate, such as "the Democratic
36 candidate for Governor" or "the Republican candidate for Supreme Court of Appeals".

37 (9) "Contribution" means a gift, subscription, loan, assessment, payment for services,

38 dues, advance, donation, pledge, contract, agreement, forbearance, promise of money, or other
39 tangible thing of value, whether conditional or legally enforceable, or a transfer of money or other
40 tangible thing of value to a person, made for the purpose of influencing the nomination, election, or
41 defeat of a candidate.

42 (A) A coordinated expenditure is a contribution for the purposes of this article.

43 (B) An offer or tender of a contribution is not a contribution if expressly and unconditionally
44 rejected or returned. A contribution does not include volunteer personal services provided without
45 compensation: *Provided*, That a nonmonetary contribution is to be considered at fair market value
46 for reporting requirements and contribution limitations.

47 (10) "Coordinated expenditure" is an expenditure made in concert with, in cooperation
48 with, or at the request or suggestion of a candidate or candidate's committee and meeting the
49 criteria provided in §3-8-9a of this code.

50 (11) "Corporate political action committee" means a political action committee that is a
51 separate segregated fund of a corporation that may only accept contributions from its restricted
52 group as outlined by the rules of the State Election Commission.

53 (12) "Direct costs of purchasing, producing, or disseminating electioneering
54 communications" means:

55 (A) Costs charged by a vendor, including, but not limited to, studio rental time,
56 compensation of staff and employees, costs of video or audio recording media and talent, material
57 and printing costs, and postage; or

58 (B) The cost of airtime on broadcast, cable, or satellite radio and television stations, the
59 costs of disseminating printed materials, studio time, use of facilities, and the charges for a broker
60 to purchase airtime.

61 (13) "Disclosure date" means either of the following:

62 (A) The first date during any calendar year on which any electioneering communication is
63 disseminated after the person paying for the communication has spent a total of \$5,000 or more

64 for the direct costs of purchasing, producing, or disseminating electioneering communications; or

65 (B) Any other date during that calendar year after any previous disclosure date on which
66 the person has made additional expenditures totaling \$5,000 or more for the direct costs of
67 purchasing, producing, or disseminating electioneering communications.

68 (14) "Election" means any primary, general, or special election conducted under the
69 provisions of this code or under the charter of any municipality at which the voters nominate or
70 elect candidates for public office. For purposes of this article, each primary, general, special, or
71 local election constitutes a separate election. This definition is not intended to modify or abrogate
72 the definition of the term "nomination" as used in this article.

73 (15)(A) "Electioneering communication" means any paid communication made by
74 broadcast, cable or satellite signal, mass mailing, telephone bank, billboard advertisement, or
75 publication in any newspaper, magazine, or other periodical that:

76 (i) Refers to a clearly identified candidate for Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney
77 General, Treasurer, Auditor, Commissioner of Agriculture, Supreme Court of Appeals, or the
78 Legislature;

79 (ii) Is publicly disseminated within:

80 (I) Thirty days before a primary election in which the nomination for office sought by the
81 candidate is to be determined; or

82 (II) Sixty days before a general or special election in which the office sought by the
83 candidate is to be filled; and

84 (iii) Is targeted to the relevant electorate.

85 (B) "Electioneering communication" does not include:

86 (i) A news story, commentary, or editorial disseminated through the facilities of any
87 broadcast, cable or satellite television, radio station, newspaper, magazine, or other periodical
88 publication not owned or controlled by a political party, political committee, or candidate: *Provided*,
89 That a news story disseminated through a medium owned or controlled by a political party, political

committee, or candidate is nevertheless exempt if the news is:

(I) A bona fide news account communicated in a publication of general circulation or through a licensed broadcasting facility; and

(II) Is part of a general pattern of campaign-related news that gives reasonably equal coverage to all opposing candidates in the circulation, viewing, or listening area;

(ii) Activity by a candidate committee, party executive committee, a caucus campaign committee, or a political action committee that is required to be reported to the State Election Commission or the Secretary of State as an expenditure pursuant to §3-8-5 of this code or the rules of the State Election Commission or the Secretary of State promulgated pursuant to such provision: *Provided*, That independent expenditures by a party executive committee, caucus committee, or a political action committee required to be reported pursuant to §3-8-2 of this code are not exempt from the reporting requirements of this section;

(iii) A candidate debate or forum conducted pursuant to rules adopted by the State Election Commission or the Secretary of State or a communication promoting that debate or forum made by or on behalf of its sponsor;

(iv) A communication paid for by any organization operating under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986;

(v) A communication made while the Legislature is in session which, incidental to promoting or opposing a specific piece of legislation pending before the Legislature, urges the audience to communicate with a member or members of the Legislature concerning that piece of legislation;

(vi) A statement or depiction by a membership organization in existence prior to the date on which the individual named or depicted became a candidate, made in a newsletter or other communication distributed only to bona fide members of that organization;

(vii) A communication made solely for the purpose of attracting public attention to a product or service offered for sale by a candidate or by a business owned or operated by a candidate which

116 does not mention an election, the office sought by the candidate, or his or her status as a
117 candidate; or

118 (viii) A communication, such as a voter's guide, which refers to all of the candidates for one
119 or more offices, which contains no appearance of endorsement for, or opposition to, the
120 nomination or election of any candidate and which is intended as nonpartisan public education
121 focused on issues and voting history.

122 (16) "Expressly advocating" means any communication that:

123 (A) Uses phrases such as "vote for the Governor", "re-elect your Senator", "support the
124 incumbent nominee for Supreme Court", "cast your ballot for the Republican challenger for House
125 of Delegates", "Smith for House", "Bob Smith in '04", "vote Pro-Life", or "vote Pro-Choice"
126 accompanied by a listing of clearly identified candidates described as Pro-Life or Pro-Choice,
127 "vote against Old Hickory", "defeat" accompanied by a picture of one or more candidates, "reject
128 the incumbent";

129 (B) Communicates campaign slogans or individual words that can have no other
130 reasonable meaning than to urge the election or defeat of one or more clearly identified
131 candidates, such as posters, bumper stickers, advertisements, etc., which say "Smith's the One",
132 "Jones '06", "Baker", etc.; or

133 (C) Is susceptible of no reasonable interpretation other than as an appeal to vote for or
134 against a specific candidate.

135 (17) "Financial agent" means any individual acting for and by himself or herself, or any two
136 or more individuals acting together or cooperating in a financial way to aid or take part in the
137 nomination or election of any candidate for public office, or to aid or promote the success or defeat
138 of any political party at any election.

139 (18) "Financial transactions" means all contributions or loans received and all repayments
140 of loans or expenditures made to promote the candidacy of any person by any candidate or any
141 organization advocating or opposing the nomination, election, or defeat of any candidate to be

142 voted on.

143 (19) "Firewall" means a policy designed and implemented to prohibit the flow of information
144 between employees or consultants providing services for the person paying for a communication
145 and those employees or consultants currently or previously providing services to a candidate, or to
146 a committee supporting or opposing a candidate clearly identified in the communication.

147 (20) "Foreign national" means the following:

148 (A) A foreign principal, as such term is defined in 22 U.S.C. § 611(b), which includes:

149 (i) A government of a foreign country;

150 (ii) A foreign political party;

151 (iii) A person outside of the United States, unless it is established that such person:

152 (I) Is an individual and a citizen of the United States; or

153 (II) That such person is not an individual and is organized under or created by the laws of
154 the United States or of any state or other place subject to the jurisdiction of the United States and
155 has its principal place of business within the United States; and

156 (iv) A partnership, association, corporation, organization, or other combination of persons
157 organized under the laws of, or having its principal place of business in, a foreign country.

158 (B) An individual who is not a citizen of the United States or a national of the United States,
159 as defined in 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(22), and who is not lawfully admitted for permanent residence, as
160 defined by 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(20).

161 (21) "Fund-raising event" or "fundraiser" means an event such as a dinner, reception,
162 testimonial, cocktail party, auction, or similar affair through which contributions are solicited or
163 received.

164 (22) "In concert or cooperation with or at the request or suggestion of" means that a
165 candidate or his or her agent consulted with:

166 (A) The sender regarding the content, timing, place, nature, or volume of a particular
167 communication or communication to be made; or

(B) A person making an expenditure that would otherwise offset the necessity for an expenditure of the candidate or candidate's committee.

(23) "Independent expenditure" means an expenditure by a person:

(A) Expressly advocating the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate, including supporting or opposing the candidates of a political party; and

(B) That is not made in concert or cooperation with or at the request or suggestion of such candidate, his or her agents, the candidate's authorized political committee, or a political party committee or its agents.

An expenditure which does not meet the criteria for an independent expenditure is considered a contribution.

(24) "Local" refers to the election of candidates to a city, county, or municipal office and any issue to be voted on by only the residents of a particular political subdivision.

(25) "Mass mailing" means a mailing by United States mail, facsimile, or electronic mail of more than 500 pieces of mail matter of an identical or substantially similar nature within any 30-day period. For purposes of this subdivision, "substantially similar" includes communications that contain substantially the same template or language, but vary in nonmaterial respects such as communications customized by the recipient's name, occupation, or geographic location.

(26) "Membership organization" means a group that grants bona fide rights and privileges, such as the right to vote, to elect officers or directors, and the ability to hold office to its members and which uses a majority of its membership dues for purposes other than political purposes. "Membership organization" does not include organizations that grant membership upon receiving a contribution.

(27) "Membership organization political action committee" means a labor organization or a trade association, cooperative, or other incorporated membership organization that: Is composed of members; expressly states the qualifications for membership in its articles and by-laws; makes its articles, by-laws, and other organizational documents available to its members; expressly

194 seeks members; acknowledges acceptance of membership, such as by sending membership
195 cards to new members or including them on a membership newsletter list; and is organized such
196 that it operates a subsidiary entity or segregated fund within the membership organization
197 primarily for the purpose of influencing any election on the ballot in the State of West Virginia.

198 (28) "Name" means the full first name, middle name, or initial, if any, and full legal last
199 name of an individual and the full name of any association, corporation, committee, or other
200 organization of individuals, making the identity of any person who makes a contribution apparent
201 by unambiguous reference.

202 (29) "Person" means an individual, corporation, partnership, committee, association, and
203 any other organization or group of individuals.

204 (30) "Political action committee" means a committee organized by one or more persons,
205 the primary purpose of which is to support or oppose the nomination or election of one or more
206 candidates. The following are types of political action committees:

207 (A) A corporate political action committee, as that term is defined in this section;

208 (B) A membership organization political action committee, as that term is defined in this
209 section; and

210 (C) An unaffiliated political action committee, as that term is defined in this section.

211 (31) "Political committee" means any candidate committee, political action committee, or
212 political party committee.

213 (32) "Political party" means a political party as that term is defined by §3-1-8 of this code or
214 any committee established, financed, maintained, or controlled by the party, including any
215 subsidiary, branch, or local unit thereof, and including national or regional affiliates of the party.

216 (33) "Political party committee" means a committee established by a political party or
217 political party caucus for the purposes of engaging in the influencing of the election, nomination, or
218 defeat of a candidate in any election.

219 (34) "Political purposes" means supporting or opposing the nomination, election, or defeat

of one or more candidates or the passage or defeat of a ballot issue, supporting the retirement of the debt of a candidate or political committee or the administration or activities of an established political party or an organization which has declared itself a political party, and determining the advisability of becoming a candidate under the pre-candidacy financing provisions of this chapter.

~~(35)~~ "Public utility" means any person or persons, or association of persons, however associated, whether incorporated or not, including municipalities, engaged in any business, whether herein enumerated or not, which is, or shall hereafter be held to be, a public service: *Provided*, That "public utility" does not include individuals or entities owning a solar photovoltaic energy facility located on and designed to meet only the electrical needs of the premises of a retail electric customer, the output of which is subject to a power purchase agreement with the retail electric customer, subject to §24-2-1(a) of this code.

~~(35)~~ (36) "Targeted to the relevant electorate" means a communication which refers to a clearly identified candidate for statewide office or the Legislature and which can be received by 140,000 or more individuals in the state in the case of a candidacy for statewide office, 8,220 or more individuals in the district in the case of a candidacy for the State Senate, and 2,410 or more individuals in the district in the case of a candidacy for the House of Delegates.

~~(36)~~ (37) "Telephone bank" means telephone calls that are targeted to the relevant electorate, other than telephone calls made by volunteer workers, regardless of whether paid professionals designed the telephone bank system, developed calling instructions, or trained volunteers.

~~(37)~~ (38) "Unaffiliated political action committee" means a political action committee that is not affiliated with a corporation or a membership organization.

§3-8-8a. Public Utility contributions to political candidates, campaigns, or political action committees prohibited; penalties for violation.

The Legislature finds:

(1) That public utilities have de facto monopoly powers, with individual consumers having very limited options for alternative service;

(2) That monetary or other donations by public utilities using funds derived from rate payers to political candidates committees, groups that can make contributions to political candidates committees, or to charitable groups is a violation of the First Amendment rights of rate payer; and

(3) That public utilities should focus above all else on providing needed services at the lowest cost to rate payers, and that expenditures or donations not specifically directed at providing needed services is a violation of the public utilities' fiduciary responsibilities to rate payers.

(b) A public utility or an officer, agent, or person acting on behalf of any public utility, whether incorporated under the laws of this or any other state or of a foreign country, may not use funds derived from rate payers to pay, give, lend, or authorize to be paid, any money or other thing of value belonging to the public utility, to donate or make contributions to political candidates committees, groups that can make contributions to political candidates committees, or to any candidate or candidate's campaign committee for nomination or election to any statewide office or any other elective office in the state or any of its subdivisions.

(c) Any person violating any provision of this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not more than \$1,000, or confined in jail for not more than 30 days, or both fined and confined.

CHAPTER 24. PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION.

**ARTICLE 3. DUTIES AND PRIVILEGES OF PUBLIC UTILITIES SUBJECT TO
REGULATIONS OF COMMISSION.**

§24-3-2a. Charitable contributions by public utilities prohibited.

A public utility or an officer, agent, or person acting on behalf of any public utility, whether
incorporated under the laws of this or any other state or of a foreign country, may not pay, give,

- 3 lend, or authorize to be paid, any money or other thing of value belonging to the public utility to
4 donate to or make contributions to charitable groups or organizations. Nothing in this section
5 precludes public utility officers or employees individually from using their personal funds or from
6 raising funds for charitable groups or organizations.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to prohibit public utilities from making contributions to political candidates or campaigns, political action committees, groups that can make contributions from funds derived from rate payers to political candidates, campaigns, or political action committees; creating criminal offense and penalties for violation; and prohibiting charitable contributions by public utilities to charitable organizations

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from a heading or the present law and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.