

Senate Poised to Finally Digitize Error-Prone Campaign Finance Reporting

By Jack Corrigan, NextGen, 9-10-18

<https://www.nextgov.com/cio-briefing/2018/09/senate-poised-finally-digitize-error-prone-campaign-finance-reporting/151144/>

Lawmakers are on the cusp of reforming an antiquated campaign finance process that's led to millions of dollars in misreported spending on Senate races.

A one-line provision tucked away in the 2019 Legislative Branch funding bill would require Senate candidates to electronically file campaign spending reports with the Federal Election Commission. If passed, the measure would do away with the current paper-based filing system that frequently jumbles data and costs nearly \$1 million to operate every year.

The amendment, which adopted its single sentence from the [Senate Campaign Disclosure Parity Act](#), was included in the final version of a nearly \$150 billion [minibus spending bill](#) approved Monday by conference committee.

Lawmakers have tried and failed to pass some version of the proposal in every session of Congress for [the last 15 years](#).

Unlike presidential and House candidates, Senate hopefuls disclose spending numbers through paper reports. Today, digitizing those documents can take more than a month—the Senate Secretary must scan the physical copies and send them to the FEC, which then uses multiple contractors to convert the scans into machine-readable data before posting them online.

Given its many moving parts, the process unsurprisingly leads to errors. Digitized filings are 10 times more likely than electronic filings to contain “at least one significant error,” and some 20 percent do, according to [the Center for Public Integrity](#).

In its study, the group uncovered more than \$62 million in campaign spending that was mislabeled or omitted by the digital conversion process. The discrepancies largely resulted from misplaced decimal points, figures pulled from the wrong fields or simple typos by people manually inputting data.

The FEC estimates moving to an electronic filing system would save upwards of \$900,000 every year while drastically shortening the amount of time it takes to publish disclosure figures, commission Deputy Press Secretary Christian Hilland told *Nextgov*. While today it takes about a month to digitize and publish paper disclosures, Hilland said electronically filed reports would be available online “almost immediately.”

In last year’s legislative recommendation report, commissioners [said](#) the record number of financial disclosures it’s receiving for the 2018 midterms makes the need for an electronic filing system more urgent. The commission has pushed for the same policy change in [every recommendation report](#) since 2002.

“The only negative that I can think of is that reporters and members of the public may have longer nights on filing deadline days ... as more financial activity will be readily available to them,” Hilland said.