



**Testimony of  
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On Behalf of Fair Elections for New York Coalition**

**Submitted to NYS Senate Finance & Assembly Ways & Means Committee Chairs  
Joint Legislative Hearing on Local/General Government  
For February 6th, 2024**

Senate Finance Chair Krueger, Assembly Ways & Means Chair Weinstein, and members of the New York State Legislature:

My name is Karen Wharton and I am presenting this testimony on behalf of Fair Elections for New York. Fair Elections is a coalition of over 200 organizations that believe New Yorkers deserve a responsive, accountable government.

The Fiscal Year 2024-25 budget provides a critical opportunity to advance policies that address New York's deep economic inequality in education, housing, healthcare, climate, and racial justice. It is through a healthy, inclusive and representative democracy that New Yorkers will be able to bring about the changes that are needed. That is why we must fully fund the state's Public Campaign Finance Program (PCFP).

The small donor PCFP, administered by the Public Campaign Finance Board (PCFB) at the State Board of Elections, was designed to ensure "a government that is accountable to all of the state's voters regardless of wealth or position" by amplifying small donations from everyday constituents. It was launched in November 2022 and is available for the first time this 2024 legislative election cycle. The deadline for candidates to enroll in the program is February 26, 2024. Polling shows that most New Yorkers support this program regardless of political affiliation. The enrollments show that it is popular with candidates, too. Already, over 200 candidates have registered in the program. And this number is expected to increase.

We appreciate Governor Hochul's FY 2025 New York State executive budget proposal appropriation of \$114.5 million for the PCFP, including \$14.5 million for administrative costs and \$100 million for public matching funds.

As budget negotiations get underway, we call on Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Heastie to ensure the state's final budget includes the full \$114.5 million in the Governor's proposed budget. This investment will help ensure that the program fulfills its promise to strengthen our democracy by elevating the voices of everyday New Yorkers in our political process and delivering on issues that matter most.

Take climate, for instance. The way we address climate change is to get rid of fossil fuels. This means phasing out the use of natural gas in our homes and gasoline in our cars. It means giving the Public Service Commission the authority and direction to align gas utility regulation and gas system planning with our climate mandates.

Although most climate advocates in New York support this approach and most New Yorkers support legislation to end fossil fuels in new buildings, the move away from natural gas is being hindered by an orchestrated industry campaign to halt progress. Corporate contributors continue to spend huge sums on state elections, translating into a disproportionate influence on our political process. Those contributors' voices and opinions, and those of their lobbying firms, are at odds with the solutions our communities need.

Let's also examine the issue of housing. Albany's failure to address the housing crisis is largely due to the corporate interests that rule the day. The system allows real estate interests to legally give tens of thousands of dollars to state candidates and even more money lobbying them once elected. Real estate interests spent over \$8 million in 2023 to defeat Good Cause, a law that would protect tenants from discrimination and help keep everyday New Yorkers housed.

With public matching funds and new maximum contribution limits across the board, we will begin to reduce the undue influence of these special interests in politics. Candidates who rely on public funds to fuel their campaigns, when re-elected or elected, are less likely to be swayed by the powerful special interests or lobbyists and more encouraged to prioritize the needs of their constituents. As a result, candidates who use public campaign financing may be more inclined to create more room in the budget for childcare workforce investment and less room for special interest spending and tax loopholes. They might be more inclined to use revenue from the ultra-wealthy to invest more significantly in childcare services that would transform the lives of thousands of families from Buffalo to Brooklyn and enable parents to return to work. When we prioritize investing in children and families, everyone is better off with safer communities, healthier families, and a stronger economy.

The Public Campaign Finance Program will positively impact all the issues that everyday New Yorkers care about. These examples hint at a more fundamental question: if political contributions are a form of speech, how can the poor and the working class be heard if the wealthy's big money drowns out their voices? Every voice should have an equal say, and while we cannot stop big money from trying to put its thumb on the scale, the way to counteract its corrosive influence is by having a robust system where small amounts of money from regular people count as much, and are valued as much, as the big checks.

Lastly, it must be noted that lowering financial barriers to running successful campaigns is an equity issue. It is especially meaningful for voters who historically have faced obstacles in private wealth-based politics, including women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and low-income individuals. Combined with voting reforms, this public policy brings more people into the democratic process.

In closing, Fair Elections for NY supports fully funding the Public Campaign Finance Program. We urge the legislature to allocate \$114.5 million to the program as included in the FY 2024-25 Executive Budget. If you would like to discuss this further, please free to contact me by email at [kwharton@citizenactionny.org](mailto:kwharton@citizenactionny.org) or by telephone at (917)821-1828. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program.