



Joint Legislative Public Hearings On
2018-2019 Executive Budget Proposal
Local Government Officials/General Government

Testimony of Rosemary Rivera, Co-Executive Director
Citizen Action of New York

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rosemary Rivera and I am the Co-Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York. Citizen Action is a statewide, grassroots membership organization that fights for social, racial, economic and environmental justice. We do so with our grassroots leaders in our robust chapters in Buffalo, Rochester, Utica, Binghamton, Albany, Schenectady, Kingston and the greater Hudson Valley, New York City and our Long Island affiliate, the Long Island Progressive Coalition.

Citizen Action of New York and the broader set of groups that make up Fair Elections for New York, have made public financing of elections a major priority because the government will never be adequately responsive to voters, especially lower-income voters and communities of color, as long as election campaigns and public policymaking are heavily influenced, or even have the appearance of being heavily influenced, by wealthy donors and corporate interests. Our efforts to organize for social, racial, and economic justice, and to empower low and moderate-income New Yorkers to have a voice in their community, state, and nation, are held back at every level by the overwhelming influence and control of money in politics. As much as the power of big money must lessen, people power and participation must increase dramatically. There are two distinct but inseparable sides to the democracy coin – getting big money out and getting people in. As we work to get big money out and move small donor participation forward, we also fight for full scale voting rights reforms that make voting easier and more accessible for all New Yorkers, particularly those who have been underrepresented and disenfranchised. We applaud the legislature for its early and

quick passage of strong voting rights reform package that included key reforms we have fought for like early voting. Thank you for that.

But we also know that we will not see the structural changes we need as a society to allow our families and communities to thrive equitably, as long as big money and corporate interests dominate the government. The democratic structures we've built over time to create the world we seek are being torn down. The work of the Fair Elections for New York campaign addresses a system that perpetuates economic and racial oppression, one of the root problems in the structure of democracy in America and New York. As Washington continues to attack and destroy democratic institutions, we must build them from the bottom up.

Those who have always felt the impact of failed education, housing, climate and transit policies at the state level now wonder if the big donors who have held them back, will continue to impede proactive solutions necessary to make real changes in people's lives. Homelessness and affordable housing advocates with the influence of Real Estate. Parent activists and education advocates with the role of Hedge fund donors pushing for privatization. Environmental activists with the influence of big oil, and criminal justice reform advocates with the new money we are beginning to see from the "big pot" industry.

So today I want to talk about why the kind of campaign finance proposal set forth in the Governor's Executive budget and in earlier bills sponsored by both Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Carl Heastie - a small donor public financing system of elections - is what is necessary for the kind of social change we seek. I believe, as does Citizen Action, that many of the solutions to the ills in our society will need to be resolved in the political realm. What I and others across our state are coming to realize is if we don't have a political system that actually works for the people, then those ills will not only persist, but they will worsen and we are seeing the repercussions of that everyday.

We are seeing more and more organic social movements calling for political change pop up across the country and it all stems from the fact that our society is in crisis and that the wealthy continue to dominate the political system perpetuating the inequality in our nation. It was the Occupy movement that maybe most recently brought the awareness and language that captured so many people - the idea that in this country we have total runaway inequality - the 1%. And if you ask the everyday person on the street corner where I live, they'll tell you exactly who they think those 1 percenters own - our government. Why else would we all be on the brink of homelessness, underfunded schools and health care costs that stop us from even finding a doctor. The elite mega-donors lobbyists are not giving money away from the kindness of their heart. The

common belief is that they are lining the politicians pockets up because they want AND GET something in return. That is our pay to play system and it leaves the rest of us out in the cold. This notion, whether fully true or not, is what people feel. It makes people feel angry and powerless to make change.

Citizen Action is literally it's name. Our job is to inspire and train people to engage in action as citizens of this society. We engage people in politics, in pressuring their elected officials, who work for them, to fight for what will make concrete positive changes in their lives. But this dynamic I explain above, is what we are up against. A fundamental disbelief that their elected officials work for them. Why are the people who are the most affected by the issues your deciding on not voting, not filling this hearing room? People don't feel like their voices matter. They feel like their voices are silenced by the power of money.

Now I realize I'm speaking to an audience of elected officials. I'm sure what is running through your mind may be one of a few things: "is she saying that money influences me?" or "I don't take big money, I don't know who she is talking about" or "those were the old days of Albany, we're in charge now and we're not gonna let the real estate or fossil fuel guys influence us."

We work with many of you, hard each session to do the right thing. And many times good things happen. I've seen each year the the Assembly restore deep cuts to school funding. I see the amazing amounts of social justice legislation you all have made law in the past few weeks. But we are all wondering what will happen to the economic justice reforms to come: passing a truly universal health care system, passing a polluter penalty to make big oil finally pay for their destruction of the planet and our communities, or maybe the simplest example - raising taxes on the rich and finally put an end to the austerity measures that have starved our communities of the basic services that are necessary after decades of disinvestment. Big money isn't going away, and it won't go away simply because different legislators are in power. Or will it?

To ensure it does, passing a system of small donor public campaign finance, that gives an alternative to the big money system fueled by \$5 or \$10,000 a ticket Albany fundraisers, is the answer.

Doing so could be the beginning of restoring the trust that is so deeply broken. Doing so will allow us to believe that we can take on the most pressing issues of our time including the deep economic and racial inequality of our society.

At the end of the day civic life begins at home allowing us to take root and participate in our community and local politics. It is difficult to get a person to think outside of herself and take an interest in the matters of the whole state. But talk about a person's housing and she sees that this is actually a public matter that has a great bearing on her

greatest private interests. Talk about a mother's children and the education they receive and they think about the bearing of government on their self interest of educating their child. Talk to someone about the cost of their medicine and they see the government has something to do with it.

It is only when we see streets as our streets, schools as our schools and government as our government do we take the time to dedicate time and resources and becoming engaged citizens. Isn't that the goal here? To have more voices and voters in our electoral system? As long as elections and our government is viewed not FOR and BY the people but only good for a certain select few people, we will never achieve the engagement that we want. Working on behalf of the common good is the engine of democracy. But the people cannot trust a government where they cannot compete with the monied interests. That my friends, deteriorates the fabric of our society and the idea of government of, for and by the people.

I encourage you all, now, to take the bold step that will begin to correct our course. And that step starts by passing a system that puts people - small donors, not big donors at the center of our politics again.

Thank you.