

Testimony February 11th 11:00 AM

Good morning. I am Joan Mandle, Emerita Professor at Colgate University in Hamilton New York, and Executive Director of the Democracy Matters Institute. Democracy Matters works with high school and college students throughout the state of New York. As our name implies, the students establish chapters of Democracy Matters in their schools and campuses to strengthen and protect our democracy. Students in DM clubs educate and mobilize students and faculty as advocates for voting reform, they register students to vote, and they make sure that they get to the polls on election day. They are excited that this legislature has begun to pass legislation that will provide increased access for all New Yorkers to vote.

However, the most important issue that Democracy Matters students have been focused on over the years is the overwhelming problem of money in politics. They are encouraged that the LIC Loophole has been closed since that was one of the ways that wealthy donors could contribute large sums to campaigns and exert unequal influence over legislation and the laws and policies that we all live with.

But within the question of money and politics, the critical issue for Democracy Matters students is the need to provide potential candidates with the ability to run for office without being dependent on large donations. That is why they are passionate about working for a small-donor public financing matching system. That is why they are working on their campuses and off to educate and mobilize students and other citizens to support Fair Elections.

And that is why I am here today. I have asked students who were unable to make it to Albany to send me statements about why they care and why they think you should care about Fair Elections – why they urge the NY legislature to become a national leader in supporting a small-donor public financing system so that what they were told in elementary school can become true – that anyone can have a chance to run for office and serve as a legislator at the state or the national level.

I have been a college professor for many years and have talked with literally thousands of students about the fact that democracy means that all citizens have an equal voice in making the laws and policies under which they will live. It is voting that is essential to that deep notion of political equality on which this country was founded. But that equality is deeply compromised- even arguably destroyed- by the ability of wealthy individuals to unequally influence who runs for political office and who wins by donating large contributions to political campaigns. The polls that show that a large political system and has too much influence over candidates and policies has been corroborated by scholarly research. Scholars like Martin Gilens of Princeton University, Benjamin Page of Stanford University, Larry Bartels at Vanderbilt University, Lawrence Lessig of Harvard Law School, and others have, through empirical studies, demonstrated that citizens who are unable to contribute large sums to political campaigns have little or no influence over policy and legislation, while those who make large contribution have outsized influence..

But as important as that research is, at least as important is what everyday people believe about their government. So I want to close letting the students speak for themselves even though they couldn't make it here today. Here are a few statements they sent to me.

Sean O'Brien from Binghamton University: "I really want to run for office one day wither in my city or to serve in the NY state legislature. But with my students loans, I honestly don't know how I can manage it. I also don't know any wealthy people who would give me the money I would need to be competitive in today's climate. Small donor public financing would make it possible for me to fulfill my dream to run for office in the state of New York.

Ellen Tricomi, a senior at SUNY Oneonta. “I care a lot about different issues like the environment, criminal justice, and trying to get a good-paying job when I graduate. But the most important thing to me - that I think would make all of these other things possible - is a democracy where everyone has an equal say. It’s just not fair that because someone has lots of money that they can have more political influence and power than me. Please give candidates in New York the option to run with Fair Elections and let our state be a leader in creating a real democracy for all.

Matt Evans, at Syracuse University, “For a long time I’ve been pretty cynical about politics and so are my friends. We were pretty angry that we had no say because of all the corruption and all the money in politics. But when I heard about a club that was working at SU on getting big money out of politics with small donor public financing like in New York City, and that it might pass in New York this year, I jumped on it and got involved. I have to say I feel pretty hopeful now and I’m working on my friends too.”

Sam Beckenhauer, at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie: “I am majoring in political science and ‘ve studied the way public campaign financing systems in places like Connecticut, Los Angeles, New York City and counties in Maryland have really change the political culture and got lots of more people engaged. They also enable young people without a lot of money or friends with money to run. That’s what my generation really wants – a chance to have a real say - and why I’m working for Fair Elections.”