



Make the Road New York Testimony
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on
Local Government Officials / General Government

February 11, 2019

Good Afternoon. My name is Daniel Altschuler, and I am the Director of Civic Engagement and Research at Make the Road New York. Thank you to leaders in both chambers of the legislature for creating this opportunity for testimony. I respectfully submit the following testimony on behalf of Make the Road New York, to express our **support for passing a system of public financing of elections as part of this year's state budget.**

Make the Road New York is the largest grassroots organization of immigrants and working-class people of color in New York, working to build the power of our communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services. With a membership of over 23,000 low-income individuals and almost 20 years of history in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester, we tackle the critical issues facing our community, including workers' rights, tenants' rights, language access, TGNCIQ+ (transgender, gender non-conforming, intersex, and queer) justice, health care access, youth development and immigrant civil rights. We operate community centers in Jackson Heights, Queens; Bushwick, Brooklyn; Port Richmond, Staten Island; Brentwood, Long Island; and White Plains, Westchester. Our community centers draw upwards of 15,000 people annually for adult literacy classes, legal and support services, and thousands more for community education meetings and campaign planning.

A critical part of our work is to increase civic engagement in our communities. We do this work—going door-to-door in our neighborhoods, holding phone banks, holding community education workshops, and more—because all too often, the voices of immigrant communities and working-class people, especially those of color, are excluded from the political process. In New York State, we see this particularly through the current system of campaign financing, in which candidates have rely heavily on large contributions from wealthy individuals and corporations. Particular sectors, especially real estate, have taken advantage of the current system—under which they can pump virtually limitless resources into state elections—to block progress on vital community priorities, such as strengthening tenant protections. Dark money has also been used to finance anti-immigrant electioneering, making New York's political climate increasingly toxic.

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The current system is triply damaging to the communities we represent. First, it means that most politicians pay less attention to the needs and rights of members of our communities, both during political campaigns and when they are legislating. Second, it discourages participation in our communities, depressing voter registration and turnout. Third, it dissuades members of our communities from running for office, as all too often they do not believe they can compete with the big money that other candidates—those who are better-off or have close connections to wealthy people and large corporations—can raise.

In a legislative session in which both chambers have already passed vital legislation to increase civic participation and restrict limited liability corporation (LLC) political spending (measures that we support), we firmly believe that the next urgent step for New York to take is to pass a public financing system for our elections as part of the upcoming budget. By implementing a six-to-one matching system, New York would take an enormous stride towards leveling the playing field of our democracy.

Such a public financing system would dramatically increase the ability of members of the communities that we represent to participate meaningfully in state elections—to make their voices heard and to counter the big money that has poisoned our politics. As we have seen elsewhere, a public financing system would also increase diversity among candidates for public office, such that candidates would more closely reflect the rich diversity of New York's communities. **We thus urge you to include a public financing system in the upcoming budget.**

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. Should you have any questions or wish to discuss this topic further, please contact me at Daniel.altschuler@maketheroadny.org or 917-494-5922.