



**Testimony of Jonah Minkoff-Zern
On Behalf of Public Citizen’s Democracy Campaign**

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

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

My name is Jonah Minkoff-Zern and I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of **Public Citizen**.

Here at Public Citizen, we emphasize that all aspects of the U.S. government should be for the public and not driven by large corporations or industries. As a non-partisan organization with more than 52,000 members and supporters in New York and 500,000 members and supporters nationwide, we are dedicated to discovering new ways to push democracy forward and amplify the voices of everyday New Yorkers in our politics. That is why we have been working alongside other grassroots groups in the Fair Elections for New York coalition since 2018 to advance small donor public financing in New York State.

Public Citizen applauds the Executive Budget’s commitment to fully funding the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program (PCFP) for FY 2024-25. It provides \$114.5 million for the program, including \$14.5 million for administrative costs and \$100 million for public matching funds¹. These funds help solidify the program into New York’s campaign funding system and demonstrate to the rest of the country that the state of NY is pivotal in creating a more equitable political process for ordinary voters. As we closely approach the 2024 state legislative elections, now more than ever, the Governor’s proposed budget must provide funds for democracy by supporting the PCFB.

¹New York State. (2025, January). Retrieved from Appropriations: <https://openbudget.ny.gov/budgetPrepForm.html>

The U.S. has more than often struggled to increase voter turnout during elections². Compared to other developed countries, the U.S. voter turnout is meager and continues to lag. According to available data, voter turnout from 2018-2022 was three of the highest-turnout in U.S. elections in decades³. This means that while the U.S. may rank low in election participation compared to other nations, there is a momentum present within voters, resulting in more voter turnout. However, whatever the catalyst for the recent change may be, we must find ways to increase the momentum and prevent it from flatlining.

That is why providing the necessary funds to the PCFB will help establish new ways for voters to engage in the political process, which can increase voter turnout. For example, Seattle has used a similar program that resulted in a 10% increase in turnout compared to previous elections without the program⁴. Creating a more equitable field through PCFB helps create a more diverse field of candidates. It enables them to be less dependent on seeking funding from a small group of big donors, resulting in more civic engagement from voters who are underrepresented. Additionally, participating in the political process can help show voters that their vote matters since the PCFB creates meaningful opportunities for ordinary constituents to be more civically engaged in the democratic process⁵.

It is also essential to recognize how the program has strengthened democracy in New York City as an example of its potential for the state. In 2021, the program played a significant role in helping elect the city's most demographically representative council. Women's representation doubled to 61%, and people of color's representation increased from 51% to 67%, with 97% of those elected recipients of public financing⁶. While this data may only reflect the city of New York, it also demonstrates the possibilities that may result in the 2024 state elections, which already have more than 200 candidates enrolled in the program.

The program helps remove barriers and creates an equitable space that widens outreach to communities that often face difficulties when engaging in the political process, such as people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and low-income individuals. Whether someone is a constituent or a candidate, establishing a political process that puts people first means that those often disadvantaged can attain equality.

² Desilver, D. (2022, November 1). Turnout in U.S. has soared in recent elections but by some measures still trails that of many other countries. Retrieved from Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/01/turnout-in-u-s-has-soared-in-recent-elections-but-by-some-measures-still-trails-that-of-many-other-countries/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ 2019 election cycle evaluation - seattle.gov. Accessed February 2, 2024. https://www.seattle.gov/documents/departments/ethicselections/democracypoucher/biennial%20reports/final%20dvp%20evaluation%20report%20july23_2020.pdf.

⁵ "How Campaign Finance Reform Can Increase Voter Turnout." The Decision Lab. Accessed February 2, 2024. <https://thedecisionlab.com/insights/policy/how-campaign-finance-reform-can-increase-voter-turnout>.

⁶ 8455, 208, and 9453. "Small Donor Public Financing Plays Role in Electing Most Diverse New York City Council." Brennan Center for Justice, January 24, 2024. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/small-donor-public-financing-plays-role-electing-most-diverse-new-york>.

Typically, when candidates decide to run for office, they must often disproportionately rely on big donors or their own contributions to run a successful campaign. In contrast, with the PCFB, small donors contributing \$80 can get their funds matched six-fold to make the total \$480, giving small donors more say during the electoral process⁷. The result will be that constituents will no longer feel undervalued during campaigns because the program incentivizes outreach to a wider array of voters.. Candidates, especially those from a minority background, will no longer have to depend on private win races but can depend on community outreach, knowing that focusing on the people first will not inevitably put them at a disadvantage against big donors.

Further contribution to the program only ensures more of an equitable playing field for candidates who may not have ties to big donors. One of the primary goals of this program is to remove the “money” from politics and re-establish the political process as something run by the people, for the people. More often than not, a few big donors overshadow ordinary voters during an election cycle. During the 2022 elections, only 200 large benefactors supported numerous candidates, with almost \$16 million contributed to races statewide, compared to only \$13.5 million from over 200,000 ordinary constituents who spent \$250 or less on donations⁸. Implementing the PCFB will help ensure campaigns can plan their fundraising strategies around community outreach instead of solely being dependent on large donors. This means that diverse voices from various communities will have the opportunity to build more personable relationships with candidates, and it will help incentivize candidates to reach out to voters to build trustworthy relationships.

As budget negotiations get underway, we call on Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Speaker Heastie, and the members of the Legislature to ensure that the state’s final budget reflects the full \$114.5 million in the governor’s proposed budget⁹. In this pivotal time when our democracy continues to fall prey to continued attacks and political standstills, our elected leaders must ensure that the PCFP gets the resources it needs to build the inclusive, representative democracy New Yorkers demand and deserve. The state of New York needs to be a leading example of what it means to fulfill its promise to strengthen democracy by elevating the voices of everyday New Yorkers in our political process.

Therefore, Public Citizen fully supports funding the Public Campaign Finance Program. Funding this program now is an investment in our democracy’s future. We urge the Legislature to allocate \$114.5 million to the program as included in the FY 2024-25 Executive Budget. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program.

⁷ “Program Overview.” New York State Public Campaign Finance Board. Accessed February 2, 2024. <https://pcfb.ny.gov/program-overview>.

⁸ NY: Top 200 political donors gave more than bottom 206,000 - times union. Accessed February 2, 2024. <https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/campaign-finance-big-donors-new-york-politics-17748550.php>.

⁹ New York State., op. cit.