

Stand Up America

228 Park Avenue South
PMB 39030
New York, NY 10003
USA



Written Testimony

Christina Harvey
Executive Director
Stand Up America

Submitted to the New York State Legislature
at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Concerning Local Government

February 6, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of funding and implementing New York’s statewide public financing program in the FY 2024-2025 budget. Stand Up America is a national grassroots and policy organization working at the local, state, and federal levels to build a truly representative democracy by expanding voting rights and reducing the impact of big money in our elections. As a New York based organization, we are dedicated to policies that amplify the voices of everyday New Yorkers in our politics, and we have been working alongside other grassroots groups in the Fair Elections for New York coalition since 2018.

Stand Up America applauds the Executive Budget’s commitment to fully fund the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program (PCFP) for FY 2024-2025. It provides \$114.5 million for the program, including \$14.5 million for administrative costs and \$100 million for public matching funds. The governor’s proposed budget will provide the funds needed to support the program’s first run in the 2024 state legislative elections. We urge you to support this figure in your bicameral budgets and ensure it is included in the final budget.

We are not alone in our support of this program or the need to fully fund it. In addition to the hundreds of organizations in the Fair Elections for New York coalition, last year twenty-five national democracy and civil rights leaders—from the former President of the NAACP to the Executive Director of Black Voters Matter—sent an [open letter](#) to the New York legislature urging the legislature to fully fund this program. A [poll conducted last February](#) by Stand Up America and Data for Progress found that 9 out of 10 New Yorkers believe that wealthy political donors have a greater influence on politicians than the average voter, and that poll concluded that 61 percent of New Yorkers support the small-dollar matching program.

New Yorkers deserve a state government that represents all of us — where candidates and elected officials can focus on what our communities need, not what big-money donors and special interests want. The small donor public financing program promises to bring us one step closer to that goal, but only if it is adequately funded. That is why Stand Up America members in New York sent more than 4,100 constituent emails to their legislators last year in support of fully funding this program, and thousands of New Yorkers clicked on our [digital ads](#).

The public financing program, the first statewide program of its kind in the country, was enacted by the legislature in 2020 and launched on November 9, 2022. To date, 200 candidates have enrolled in the program for the 2024 legislative elections — a clear sign of the program’s popularity among voters and candidates alike. This number continues to grow, especially as we approach the February 26, 2024 deadline for candidates to opt in.

It is essential that the PCFB receives adequate funding for both administration and future matching funds this year to help the program reach its full potential. Full funding will enable the agency to build candidate and voter confidence in the program’s solvency. It will also assure campaigns that they can plan their fundraising strategies around collecting small contributions from constituents instead of large donors.

Until now, candidates’ dependence on large contributions to run a competitive campaign in New York State has given corporations and the super-wealthy an outsized role in shaping policy, and diminished the voices of everyday citizens. It has also locked many qualified candidates out of elected office — especially women, people of color, low-income and marginalized candidates, who may not have access to donors with deep pockets.

While these problems are not unique to the Empire State, the extreme concentration of wealth here has essentially erased the influence of small-dollar donations in state elections. New York State’s new system addresses this by empowering ordinary voters and making it easier for candidates from all walks of life to run and win.

Matching small-dollar donations also helps to ensure that candidates spend more time listening to working people, not asking wealthy donors or corporate lobbyists for campaign funds. I should know — I spent more than 15 years as a senior aide to New York State elected officials, including in the state legislature and Attorney General’s office. Between dialing for dollars and shuttling to and from fundraisers and donor meetings, elected officials often spend 25 percent of their time or more fundraising for reelection. This means less time listening to constituents and less time for important legislative and legal work.

No one gets into public service in hopes of spending a quarter of their time soliciting campaign donations. In fact, it’s often the last thing elected officials want to be doing. Our leaders should

not be forced to choose between doing their jobs and keeping them. New York's small-dollar matching system helps liberate them from some of the demands of fundraising, so that they can serve our communities more effectively.

We have seen the alternative. Time and time again, progress has been stalled by mega donors whose interests are at odds with those of ordinary citizens.

If we want to see change on any of the issues we care about — like affordable housing, community safety, and quality schools — New Yorkers need a state government that is not beholden to special interests.

For our state to live up to the promise of a democracy that represents everyone, everyday New Yorkers must have the ears of their elected officials and elected officials must have time to dedicate to the business of government. We urge the Legislature to allocate \$114.5 million to the program as included in the FY 2024-25 Executive Budget.

* * *

As the 2024 election cycle kicks off, Stand Up America will continue to encourage candidates for state offices to use our new public financing system, and we are counting on the legislature to ensure that system is fully funded. Funding this program now is an investment in our democracy's future.