



Testimony of
Karen Wharton, Democracy Coalition Coordinator
On Behalf of Fair Elections for New York Coalition
&
The NY BIPOC Democracy Table

Submitted to NYS Senate Finance & Assembly Ways & Means Committee Chairs
Joint Legislative Hearing on Local/General Government
For February 11, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I am here today to urge you to fully fund the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program in this year's one-house budgets, consistent with the Public Campaign Finance Board's request of \$116.1 million—\$100 million for matching funds and \$16.1 million for administration.

The program for state legislative candidates ran successfully in 2024, and the results were clear and measurable.¹ More than 300 legislative candidates signed up, representing the vast majority of candidates on the ballot, and nearly 200 candidates qualified for public funds.² Over 50,000 New Yorkers made small-dollar, in-district contributions, many engaging as donors in a state election for the first time. Meanwhile, the number of all other individual contributors, including entities like super PACs and corporations, decreased by about a quarter from past years.³

From a racial justice perspective, these outcomes matter deeply. For decades, candidates from Black, Latino, Asian, immigrant, and working-class communities have faced structural barriers to

¹ Celina Avalos Jaramillo and Ian Vandewalker, "New York's Answer to Billionaire-Fueled Campaigns," Brennan Center for Justice, February 14, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/new-yorks-answer-billionaire-fueled-campaigns>.

² Marina Pino et al., "New York State's Public Campaign Financing Program Empowers Constituent Small Donors," Brennan Center for Justice, February 6, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/new-york-states-public-campaign-financing-program-empowers-constituent>.

³ Ibid.

running viable campaigns—barriers rooted in unequal access to wealth and political donor networks. The Public Campaign Finance Program directly confronts those inequities by valuing community support over personal wealth and local participation over large checks. In 2024, more candidates from historically underrepresented communities were able to compete on more equal footing—not because they had access to big money, but because they had strong ties to the people they sought to represent.

Participation was truly statewide, spanning urban, suburban, and rural districts across New York. This is not a regional or niche program—it is a statewide investment in fair, competitive elections. And it is a powerful tool to counter big money: even in the 2024 contests with the highest levels of outside spending, publicly financed candidates still made their case to voters, and they often won.

Looking ahead, the program will expand to statewide candidates for the first time in June 2026. As of this date, over 300 candidates across the state have opted in to use public financing this year.⁴ This strong participation makes full funding now a matter of responsible fiscal planning. Adequate, predictable funding ensures orderly administration, equal treatment of candidates who follow the rules, and protection of the state's existing investment.

Critically, a large majority of New York voters across party lines want to see the program receive such funding.⁵ This recent polling by Data for Progress and Citizen Action of New York also shows New York voters back the program by a margin of nearly 41 points, up from a 34-point margin of support in a similar poll fielded in 2023.⁶

Fully funding the Public Campaign Finance Program is not an expansion. It is responsible stewardship of a reform the Legislature has already enacted. I urge you to include the full \$116.1 million request in your one-house budgets this year and ensure it remains in the final budget.

Thank you.

⁴ Public Campaign Finance Board, "Public Campaign Finance Candidate List," accessed February 6, 2026, <https://publicreporting.elections.ny.gov/PCFBCandidateRegList/PCFBCandidateRegList>.

⁵ Data for Progress and Citizen Action of New York, "NYS Public Campaign Finance Program Polling," accessed February 6, 2026,

<https://www.filesforprogress.org/datasets/2025/7/dfp-citizen-action-nys-pcfp-polling.pdf?inline=1>.

⁶ Ibid.