

**Written Testimony of Marina Pino
Counsel, Elections and Government Program
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law**

**Submitted to the New York State Legislature
at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Concerning Local Government Officials/General Government**

February 11, 2026

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law¹ appreciates the opportunity to testify in support of funding for New York's Public Campaign Finance Program and other key voting and elections reforms in the FY 2027 state budget. For over thirty years, the Brennan Center's nonpartisan expertise has informed policies that protect and expand democracy at the state, local, and federal levels.

We have seen extraordinary threats to American democracy over this last year. We have seen the concentration of exorbitant spending by billionaires and corporations with an agenda to continue influencing policies.² We have also seen the federal government retreat from its historic role of protecting voters and providing resources to state and local officials to secure the election process.³ On top of all that, the country is witnessing an astounding escalation of the administration's election interference plans in just this last month,⁴ including the FBI's unprecedented raid of Fulton County election offices⁵ and the attorney general of the United States leveraging the killing of innocent civilians in Minnesota to attempt to illegally access voter data.⁶

¹ The Brennan Center is a nonpartisan public policy and law institute that focuses on the fundamental issues of democracy and justice and for thirty years has studied, litigated, and developed policy solutions regarding money in politics, voting, and election administration. The opinions expressed in this testimony are only those of the Brennan Center and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NYU School of Law.

² Ian Vandewalker, "Pro-Trump Super PAC Raises Record-Breaking \$305 Million," Brennan Center for Justice, February 4, 2026, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/pro-trump-super-pac-raises-record-breaking-305-million>.

³ Lawrence Norden, "How the Federal Government Is Undermining Election Security," Brennan Center for Justice, April 14, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/how-federal-government-undermining-election-security>.

⁴ Jasleen Singh, "The Trump Administration's Campaign to Undermine the Next Election," Brennan Center for Justice, August 3, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/trump-administrations-campaign-undermine-next-election>.

⁵ Wendy R. Weiser, "Trump Administration Escalates Election Meddling by Seizing 2020 Voting Records in Georgia," Brennan Center for Justice, February 4, 2026, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/trump-administration-escalates-election-meddling-seizing-2020-voting>.

⁶ Michael Waldman, "Bondi Links Minneapolis Violence to Voter Data," Brennan Center for Justice, January 27, 2026, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/bondi-links-minneapolis-violence-voter-data>.

At this pivotal moment, leadership at the state level is more vital than ever. And thanks to this Legislature, New York has been leading the way in passing some of the boldest pro-voter reforms. The Public Campaign Finance Program you enacted completed its inaugural cycle in 2024 and a special election cycle in 2025, empowering everyday New Yorkers and rewarding candidates for seeking support within their communities. You delivered important legislation requiring transparency when political communications use AI-generated deepfakes, helping voters identify deceptive political content before casting their ballots. And you passed legislation moving certain local town and county elections to even-numbered years, paving the way for historically underrepresented New Yorkers to have a stronger voice in their government. These gains build on other critical measures you have enacted in recent years, including the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York (NY VRA), automatic voter registration (AVR), and a mandatory training curriculum for poll workers.

More work is needed to safeguard the election system, the voters who participate in it, and the officials who run it. As the 2026 elections quickly approach, and as the Constitution and rule of law are under assault across the country, we ask you to redouble your commitment to strengthening New York's democracy. The final FY 2027 budget must include the resources necessary to support the many initiatives you have championed for New Yorkers and to ensure smooth and secure elections going forward.

I. Fully Fund the Public Campaign Finance Program to Keep Counteracting the Outsized Role of Wealthy Donors.

The Brennan Center strongly supports the Executive Budget's appropriation of \$116.1 million for the Public Campaign Finance Program (PCFP) in FY 2027, including \$16.1 million for program administration and \$100 million for matching funds.⁷ We urge you to commit to this amount so the program can continue delivering benefits to candidates and donors alike.

The PCFP was enacted to make the government more accountable to all New York voters, "regardless of wealth or position," as the law's preamble declares.⁸ The result is the strongest campaign finance reform enacted anywhere to curtail the distorting role of private wealth in politics. The Brennan Center's analysis of legislative candidates' 2024 fundraising shows the success of constituent-focused campaign financing, even as wealthy donors and special interests reign supreme elsewhere.⁹

The program's design responds to the megadonor influence that the Supreme Court unleashed with its notorious decision in *Citizens United* in 2010.¹⁰ Rather than fighting big money with more big money, the program elevates New Yorker's modest donations. Its tiered match rewards the smallest donations the most. Matchable contributions must come from the people a candidate

⁷ New York State Division of the Budget, *Our New York, Our Future: FY 2027 Executive Budget Briefing Book*, <https://www.budget.ny.gov/pubs/archive/fy27/ex/book/briefingbook.pdf>.

⁸ N.Y. Elec. Law § 14-200.

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ Daniel I. Weiner, "Citizens United, Explained," Brennan Center for Justice, last updated January 29, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.

seeks to represent – inside the district for legislative candidates and within the state for statewide races. These features are designed to incentivize candidates to focus on their constituents as they fundraise and to encourage more New Yorkers to participate in the political process as donors.

That is precisely what happened in the program’s inaugural run. In 2024, small in-district donations of \$250 or less made up a much larger share of total fundraising than in previous cycles.¹¹ These donations leaped from less than 5 percent of overall funding in recent cycles to 45 percent in 2024 when including matching funds. Meanwhile, the share of candidates’ funding from wealthy individuals and entities like corporations decreased significantly (70 percent or more in recent cycles to 38 percent in 2024).

This change occurred across the state. Most legislative campaigns participated, including large majorities of both Democrats and Republicans. Of the 328 candidates who enrolled, the Public Campaign Finance Board (PCFB) issued matching funds to 192 candidates.¹² Critically, publicly financed candidates in lower-income districts participated and fundraised at similar rates as those in wealthier districts.¹³ The PCFB timely issued public funds to all participating campaigns across thirteen payment dates.¹⁴

Small in-district *donors* also dramatically increased in number. Across all legislative campaigns in 2024, an estimated 50,800 New Yorkers made small-dollar in-district donations, which is roughly twice as many as in 2020 or 2022.¹⁵ Altogether, these results indicate the system motivated more constituents giving modest amounts to participate in the political process.¹⁶

The program’s success continued in two 2025 special election races, with candidates for senate and assembly seats participating in public financing. In the North Country’s special assembly election, for example, both the Republican and Democratic candidates used the program to power their campaigns with constituent support. The state’s campaign finance data reveal that the overall median donations for these candidates were \$100.¹⁷ And ninety percent of donors in that race gave less than \$250 overall.

In addition to its success in just the first two years, the program continues to enjoy strong support. Recent polling shows that a majority of New Yorkers back the program and want to see it funded so it can keep running as intended.¹⁸ To date, over 300 candidates across the state have registered for 2026, including candidates who participated in the program last cycle and statewide

¹¹ Pino et al., “New York State’s Public Financing Program Empowers Constituent Small Donors.”

¹² New York State Public Campaign Finance Board, *2024 NYS Public Campaign Finance Program End of Cycle Report*, January 2025, <https://pcfb.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2025/01/2024-new-york-state-public-campaign-finance-board-election-cycle-report-final.pdf>.

¹³ Pino et al., “New York State’s Public Financing Program Empowers Constituent Small Donors.”

¹⁴ New York State Public Campaign Finance Board, *End of Cycle Report*.

¹⁵ Pino et al., “New York State’s Public Financing Program Empowers Constituent Small Donors.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Then-candidate Michael Cashman’s average total contributions were \$190, while candidate Brent Davison had an average total contribution of \$136. Research on file with the Brennan Center for Justice.

¹⁸ Celina Avalos Jaramillo and Marina Pino, “Poll Shows New Yorkers Continue to Support Public Campaign Finance,” Brennan Center for Justice, August 14, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/poll-shows-new-yorkers-continue-support-public-campaign-finance>.

candidates who can receive public matching funds for the first time.¹⁹ Notably, the PCFB has certified more candidates ahead of this year’s cycle when compared to the same timeframe ahead of the 2024 cycle, and there are still two more weeks until the deadline for candidates to opt in.

By committing \$116.1 million in this year’s budget to the groundbreaking program, this body can ensure that New York remains a national model for empowering voters in elections. The \$16.1 million for administrative needs is critical to support the PCFB’s ongoing efforts to ensure a smooth rollout of payments; timely and accurate audit process, and enhanced safeguards that protect taxpayer dollars.²⁰ These funds will cover, among other things, a new special project unit covering complex audits, revamped trainings, and the state’s software acquisition, which remains vital to helping campaigns ensure compliance and providing them notice of potential violations. The \$100 million for matching funds will cement candidate and public confidence that the program is available to them across this year’s elections. Fully funding the program is an investment in civic participation at a time when American democracy needs it.

II. Provide More Resources for Local Boards of Elections to Keep Protecting Their Staff, Facilities, and Voting Systems.

New York’s local boards of elections (BOEs) make our democracy work. This body must prioritize funding their operational and security needs in this budget. Doing so would send a clear message to local election officials and staff that they have the state’s support when facing any challenges in this critical election year.

The Brennan Center continues to support the bipartisan requests from New York’s local election officials for more state funding. The Executive Budget includes critical funding to support BOEs, such as pre-paid return postage and upgrades to electronic pollbooks. Given the fact that the state’s BOEs have different needs as they serve varying populations, local officials should have the most flexibility possible in the funding dispersed to them. We therefore encourage you to go further in your one-house budgets by allocating more funds for operating costs so these offices can equitably serve all eligible voters in 2026.

Insufficient funding is a well-documented challenge for election officials across the country, and New York is no exception.²¹ The state’s county-based funding model has historically left many local BOEs operating with stark imbalances in resources.²² But the problem is even more dire this year than in the past. Federal support for critical infrastructure has dramatically diminished since early 2025. The Trump administration froze all election security support shortly after taking office and further suspended the Cybersecurity Infrastructure and Security Agency (CISA)’s

¹⁹ Public Campaign Finance Board, “Public Campaign Finance Candidate List,” accessed February 6, 2026, <https://publicreporting.elections.ny.gov/PCFCandidateRegList/PCFCandidateRegList>.

²⁰ Marina Pino and Ian Vandewalker, “Strong Enforcement Protects the Integrity of Public Campaign Financing,” Brennan Center for Justice, February 28, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/strong-enforcement-protects-integrity-public-campaign-financing>.

²¹ Derek Tisler et al., *How to Fix Election Administration in New York State*, Brennan Center for Justice, December 15, 2021, 15, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/how-fix-election-administration-new-york-state>.

²² Ibid.

election security advisers.²³ The administration also rolled back funding for the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing & Analysis Center, a network that once enabled information sharing about security risks and best practices between election vendors and election officials.²⁴

Our most recent survey of local election officials across the country underscores the severity of this shifting environment. Sixty percent of local election officials surveyed across the country said they are very or somewhat concerned about these federal cuts to election security services.²⁵ Sixty-one percent were specifically concerned about CISA changing or cutting its services to election officials.²⁶ And crucially, an overwhelming majority (87 percent) said it is very or somewhat important for local and state government to make up the funding gap left by federal cuts.²⁷ The need for this Legislature's support in the current threat environment is more important than ever.

State operational funding would bring New York's spending per registered voter in line with similarly situated states that better support local election administrators.²⁸ These resources can strengthen physical and cybersecurity measures, increase staff, and upgrade aging and outdated voting machines, which are especially needed in New York. Indeed, 12 of the state's counties will be using polling place voting equipment that is at least 15 years old this year.²⁹

Alongside sustainable funding, our leaders must enact legislation to modernize the state's election administration. We applaud the Senate for passing a bill mandating election commissioner training at the beginning of this session.³⁰ This bill, which has the bipartisan support of election commissioners, is part of a larger package that directly responds to a Senate investigation that

²³ Eric Geller, "Top US Election Security Watchdog Forced to Stop Election Security Work," *WIRED*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/cisa-election-security-freeze-memo/>; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, "Security Advisors," accessed February 5, 2026, [https://www.cisa.gov/about/regions/security-advisors#:~:text=Election%20Security%20Advisors%20\(ESAs\)&text=ESAs%20increase%20the%20agency's%20internal,effective%20risk%20mitigation%20assistance%20possible](https://www.cisa.gov/about/regions/security-advisors#:~:text=Election%20Security%20Advisors%20(ESAs)&text=ESAs%20increase%20the%20agency's%20internal,effective%20risk%20mitigation%20assistance%20possible).

²⁴ Jule Pattison-Gordon, "The Feds Cut Funding for Election Security. How Will Public Officials Adapt?," *Governing*, December 2, 2025, <https://www.governing.com/management-and-administration/the-feds-cut-funding-for-election-cybersecurity-how-will-public-officials-adapt>.

²⁵ Brennan Center for Justice, *Local Election Officials Survey - July 2025*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/local-election-officials-survey-july-2025>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Tisler et al., *How to Fix Election Administration in New York State*, 6, 16 (noting that Delaware covers the full cost of administering elections, Colorado covers the full cost of elections when only a state issue or question is on the ballot and partial costs for other elections when state issues and questions are on the ballot, and Michigan reimburses local jurisdictions for the necessary costs to run presidential primaries).

²⁹ Verified Voting, "Verifier – New York State," accessed February 5, 2026, <https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/fieldedEquip/mapType/ppEquip/year/2026/state/36>. Security experts generally agree that the expected lifespan of voting equipment purchased after 2000 is close to 10 years. See, e.g., Lawrence Norden and Christopher Famighetti, *America's Voting Machines at Risk*, Brennan Center for Justice, September 15, 2014, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/americas-voting-machines-risk>.

³⁰ New York State Senate, "Senate Advances Reforms to Protect Election Integrity and Support Election Workers," January 12, 2026, <https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2026/senate-advances-reforms-protect-election-integrity-and-support>.

revealed the need for improvements across the state's BOEs.³¹ If enacted and sufficiently funded, this package will bring a suite of national best practices in election administration to New York.

III. Ensure Continued Support for Historic Voting Reforms to Keep Realizing Their Promise of More Equitable Voting Access.

The Brennan Center also urges this Legislature to fully fund implementation of the voting reforms you have already delivered. Among these achievements are the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York (NY VRA), the state's landmark legislation to fight racial discrimination in voting, and the Dr. John L. Flateau Voting Rights and Elections Database, which remains critical to realizing the NY VRA's promise of a more inclusive, multiracial democracy. The Brennan Center strongly supports the Executive Budget's appropriation of \$2.5 million to support the database.

We also support the Executive Budget's reappropriation of funds for initiatives designed to reduce barriers to voter registration. Both automatic voter registration (AVR) and online voter registration (OVR) require an effective centralized clearinghouse system. With the long-overdue first phase of AVR set to launch this month, and the second phase scheduled for later this year, it is imperative that this body commit to securing resources for it in this fiscal year. Doing so can mitigate any further delays and make clear the Legislature remains committed to modernizing New York's infrastructure so that many more eligible voters are securely registered.

The Brennan Center commends your vital work of championing reforms that empower more eligible voters in the political process, from the small donor public financing program to the NY VRA and AVR. As a national campaign to undermine confidence in our elections continues – with the force of the federal executive branch behind it – it is ever more important for this body to fully fund the state's democracy-strengthening achievements and local election officials. This moment also calls for other bold reforms, including but not limited to, legislation that would allow New Yorkers to sue federal officials who violate their constitutional rights; build upon existing anti-intimidation laws for voters by extending them to election workers and officials; and prohibit the deliberate spread of deepfakes that suppress voting.³²

The Brennan Center is ready to be of service as the Legislature continues its efforts to secure New York's elections and the voters, election workers, and infrastructure within them.

³¹ New York State Senate Elections Committee, *Report and Findings of the New York State Senate Elections Committee*, November 15, 2021, https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/press-release/attachment/elex1115_vfinal.pdf; Joanna Zdanys et al., *How to Fix the New York City Board of Elections*, Brennan Center for Justice, September 9, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/how-fix-new-york-city-board-elections>; Tisler et al., *How to Fix Election Administration in New York State*.

³² See, e.g., New York Civil Rights Act, S. 8500A, 2025-26 Sess. (N.Y. 2026), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S8500/amendment/A>; New York State Bivens Act, S. 9005/A. 1005, 2025-26 Sess. Part M (N.Y. 2026), <https://www.budget.ny.gov/pubs/archive/fy27/ex/artvii/ppgg-bill.pdf>; New York Election Officer Protection Act, S. 8646A, 2025-26 Sess. (N.Y. 2026), <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S8646/amendment/A>.