



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Zellnor Myrie

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ZELLNOR MYRIE March 20, 2019

| ISSUE: **ELECTIONS REFORMS**



For Immediate Release: March 20, 2019

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(ALBANY, NY) Senator Myrie, Chair of the Senate Elections Committee announced a hearing and rallied with colleagues and advocates to demand that public financing for New York State is included and properly funded in the state budget.

“We need big money out, and small donors in,” said Senator Myrie. “New York has the highest contribution limits in the nation. In one election cycle, you can give more to my State Senate campaign than the mayor, a member of Congress, and a U.S. Senator combined. This is absurd and unacceptable. There is no way to strike at the root of our state’s problems and inequities without publicly financed elections.”

The Senate Majority’s budget resolution, passed last week, supports establishing a publicly financed small donor matching system. The Assembly similarly passed a budget resolution with language supporting a small donor matching system. As in years past, the Governor also included public financing of elections in the Executive budget. In order to make public financing a reality, however, the legislature and Governor must agree to include reform in the Enacted Budget, due April 1, 2019.

Under a public financing system, qualifying candidates receive matching funds for every small-dollar donation up to limit. In the Governor’s proposal, each dollar donated up to \$175 would be matched 6-1. In addition, campaign contribution limits would be decreased so that a small minority of large contributions cannot dwarf those of average and low-income New Yorkers.

Currently, New York State’s contribution limits lag behind much of the country. An individual can give up to \$69,700 to statewide candidates, \$19,300 to State Senate candidates, and \$9,400 to Assembly candidates. This allows big money special interests to wield undue influence on elections.

In the 2018 election, according to the Brennan Center, the top 100 donors gave more than the bottom 137,000 donors combined, and small donations amounted to only 5 percent of total donations.

Senator Alessandra Biaggi (D-Bronx/Westchester) said: "Opponents of matching programs like NYC's will use twisted logic to try to convince you that taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for candidates' campaigns. They want you to believe that you can have something for free — elected officials who will represent what you need, even though they are paid for by wealthy donors whose interests are the opposite of yours. The truth is, if we don't pay for our elected officials' campaigns directly, we will most certainly pay indirectly, through higher rents, higher health costs, and higher prices on everything else big donors have to sell. So which would you choose?"

Senator Brian Kavanagh said: "Our democracy will be stronger and more secure when we enact public financing of campaigns driven by New Yorkers making small matchable contributions rather than mega-donors. This will help make it possible for anyone of any economic background to run for office and represent their community without needing to rely on big checks. It will also ensure that the voices of ordinary New Yorkers who are actually affected by the decisions we make in government are heard in the electoral process. We've already taken huge steps this year to remove unnecessary obstacles to voting; now we should take similarly bold action to reform the system by which campaigns are paid for."

State Senator Shelley B. Mayer said, "I strongly support public financing of elections. With this change, we will reduce the role of big money and special interests in NYS elections and policy making, and we will amplify the voices, and fuel the potential, of newcomers without personal assets to enter the political process."

Senator Rachel May said: "Today's hearing is a great opportunity to highlight the importance of a small-donor matching fund for elections in New York. We know that big money distorts our democracy at every level by favoring special interests. Our new Senate majority has the chance to get big money out of politics and increase the power of working New Yorkers so that we can make the kinds of investments -- like education and healthcare -- that will make all of us better off. This hearing provides a platform for a wide variety of stakeholders to tell us why they believe small-donor matching is a change worth making."

Senator Julia Salazar said: "Everyday New Yorkers deserve the opportunity to have a voice in their government. In last year's elections, they made their preferences clear. We need to restore trust in state government by creating a publicly financed small donor system in this year's budget. It's time for my colleagues in the Assembly and the Governor to have the courage to actually make policy, not just signal support for measures that they will not see to the finish line."

Senator Krueger said: "Our government works best when our elected officials are beholden to voters, not donors. At this point there's simply no question that money has a corrupting influence on our political process. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the new Senate Majority to help restore power to regular New Yorkers, and stop wealthy individuals, corporations, and interest groups from drowning our democracy with huge political spending."

Assemblyman Chuck Lavine, Chair of the Assembly Elections Committee, said: "I am very proud that New York State government is at the forefront of fighting to protect American voting rights."

Senator Brad Hoylman said: "Even in 2018, as voters overwhelmingly elected New York's new Senate majority and ousted the IDC, small donations made up only 5% of the money given to

statewide candidates. It's time to get serious about creating an electoral system that works for everyone— not just wealthy donors—and support public financing of our elections. I'm proud to stand with Senator Myrie and our Democratic Conference to fight for an electoral system that empowers everyday New Yorkers to participate in our elections.”

Senator Jamaal Bailey said: “We need to improve transparency in New York State politics and restore faith in government. I want to thank my colleague, Senator Myrie, for his leadership in campaign finance reform. Not only will this promote civic engagement but it will make elections fair.”

Senator Robert Jackson, whose district stretches from Marble Hill, Inwood, and Washington Heights through parts of Harlem and the Upper West Side down to Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea, said: “I strongly support campaign finance reform in New York State. Our political system must be accessible to all New Yorkers, and I consider these reforms to be critical issues of racial and economic justice. Small donor matching, lower outside contribution limits, and inclusion of more types of political offices in public funding programs are essential to lowering the barriers of entry to our political system. I thank Senator Myrie for his leadership on these issues and look forward to seeing this legislation pass in the near future.”

Ivette Alfonso, President of Citizen Action of New York, said: "New York's campaign finance laws have hurt our communities by allowing real estate developers and school privatizers to bend the rules in their favor. As a result, we have unaffordable housing and a constant struggle to fairly fund our public schools. We demand that a small donor public financing system that amplifies the voices of regular people be enacted once and for all in the New York State budget."

Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY said: “The culture of pay to play in our politics puts principles for sale to the highest bidder, and discourages New Yorkers while breeding mistrust among the voters. That’s why we need a Fair Elections system of robust campaign finance reform, built around a core of small donor matching funds – to restore accountability to the voters, and give every day people a place at the table. As part of the Fair Elections coalition, Common Cause/NY is committed to working with Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature to empower the public and stem the outrageous influence of money on our political process.

Alex Camarda, Senior Policy Advisor at Reinvent Albany, said: “28 years ago the NYS Commission on Public Integrity convened by Governor Mario Cuomo called New York State's campaign finance laws, 'a disgrace and an embarrassment' and recommended public financing of elections as the cure. Six years ago the Moreland Commission to Investigate Public Corruption came to the same conclusion. Public financing of elections is long overdue in New York State. It must be done in the budget. The time is now. No more delays - no more excuses.”

Amshula K. Jayaram, Senior Campaign Strategist at Demos, said: “Fair Elections is about racial justice, plain and simple. You cannot have a system dominated by an elite, white donor class funding campaigns and setting policy agendas who do not even remotely resemble the general population, let alone people of color. In order to tackle the issues that we care about we must break free from the shackles of big money: whether that means affordable housing, access to healthcare or criminal justice reform. It’s no secret that evictions, homelessness and mass incarceration - to name a few - have fallen most heavily on people of color. It’s also no secret that profit seeking industries have successfully blocked real and urgent reforms, regardless of whether the legislature is red or blue. In these last few days of the budget session we want to make clear that voting against campaign finance reform is an active

choice to maintain a racist, exclusionary and harmful status quo. We urge our leaders in Albany to be bold and help us forge a new path for New York State.”

Jasmine Gripper, legislative director at the Alliance for Quality Education, said: “The oversize influence of wealthy campaign donors impacts every issue, even public education. When a handful of billionaire hedge fund managers can dictate education policy despite widespread opposition from educators, parents and students, our democracy is in danger. Even in New York we have seen elected officials push destructive, pro-privatization, pro-Trump education policies at the expense and well being of millions of students that attend public schools.”

“New York's campaign finance system relies on a small number of big contributors to finance its elections, individuals and entities too often with business before the government. The result has allowed wealthy, powerful interests to have a huge say in policymaking, increased the risk of corruption, and turned off voters to participate in New York elections. A system of public financing turns that system on its head and shifts to an alternate system that allows candidates to rely on a large number of small donors to fund elections. NYPIRG urges action as part of the budget on this important issue.” said Blair Horner of NYPIRG.

“For years, Democrats in the NYS Legislature have proclaimed support for a small-donor match, public financing system and have blamed the IDC and the Republican controlled Senate for blocking its passage. We were unrelenting in helping to deliver this historic Democratic Majority for moments like this! Governor Cuomo, Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie must now follow through on the very promises that galvanized voters across the state by choosing people power over big donor money and enacting the Fair Elections package in the final budget,” said Ricky Silver, Co-lead Organizer of Empire State Indivisible

"Now is the time to act. The Working Families Party has fought tooth and nail for a progressive State Senate because New Yorkers deserve leaders who put working families first, not real estate and Wall Street. That's why we stood up to the IDC. That's why we fought tirelessly to pick up seats in the suburbs and upstate. It's time to take a stand against corporate influence over our democracy. For too long, New York's weak campaign finance system has allowed wealthy donors and corporate interests to influence the political process and drown out the voices of working New Yorkers. Enough," said Bill Lipton, Political Director of Working Families Party.

"Year after year, we watch key environmental priorities die in Albany because the millions of dollars in campaign contributions from big polluters and land developers insulate decision makers from acting in the public interest," said Roger Downs, Conservation Director for the Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter. "Without Fair Elections, it is difficult to turn the tide against issues like water contamination or climate change when an unfair advantage is given to wealthy industries that block even the most basic environmental safeguards and policies. The Governor and the legislature must establish publicly funded election campaigns in this year's budget. No more excuses."

"We applaud the senators standing up for democracy today. They understand what the Brennan Center's research has shown: Small donor public financing is the most effective way to reduce the outsized influence of the wealthy few and give regular New Yorkers a bigger voice in the political decisions that affect their lives. By insisting on a budget with small donor public financing, these senators are showing voters that they work for them. Their colleagues across the legislature and in the governor's mansion must do the same. Together they must keep small donor public financing in the budget. The millions of New Yorkers who elected them see the budget as a test of their promises of a new Albany. It's pass or fail," said Chisun Lee, Senior Counsel with the Brennan Center for Justice's Democracy

Program.

“In the wakes of Democrats unanimously passing the For the People Act (H.R. 1) in House, now is the moment for New York to pass small donor matching funds in the budget and create a state that is governed by the people, not the ruling elite,” said Jonah Minkoff-Zern, Co-Director, Public Citizen’s Democracy Is For People Campaign.

Javier H. Valdes, Co-Executive Director, Make the Road New York, said: “We stand with our Senate majority allies to say that we urgently need to pass fair elections in the state budget. Passing a reform package with a six-to-one matching system would be a game-changer for New York’s democracy. It 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. It is a win-win for immigrants and working-class people of color across this state, and it needs to be in this year’s budget.”

“CWA District 1 is proud to stand with a diverse coalition of more than 200 organizations in support of fair elections in this year's budget. New York's working people know that Albany is not representing their best interests when big money is buying influence in government. We need a small donor matching systems that ensures the voices of ordinary New Yorkers are not drowned out of the political process. We applaud Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Elections Committee Chair Senator Zellnor Myrie and the New York State Senate for championing this issue,” said Bob Master, Assistant to the Vice President CWA District 1.

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