



**Testimony of
Karen Wharton, Democracy Coalition Coordinator
On Behalf of Fair Elections for New York Coalition**

**Submitted to NYS Senate Finance & Assembly Ways & Means Committee Chairs
Joint Legislative Hearing on Local/General Government
For February 4, 2025**

Chairpersons Krueger and Pretlow, members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means committees, and members of the New York State Legislature:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Fair Elections for New York coalition. My name is Karen Wharton, and I'm the Democracy Coalition Coordinator for Citizen Action of New York and the Fair Elections coalition facilitator. Fair Elections for New York is a statewide coalition of over 200 organizations that led the fight for the 2020 creation of the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program (PCFP), which just completed its first cycle. For over two decades, coalition members have advocated for policies that amplify and engage the voices of everyday New Yorkers in our politics. Our coalition includes advocacy, good government groups, and grassroots, member-driven organizations.

Today, we stand before you to advocate for a profound investment in the future of our democracy—an allocation of \$114.5 million for the PCFP. We applaud Governor Kathy Hochul's commitment to fully funding the PCFP in her Executive Budget with this allocation, which includes \$14.5 million for administrative costs and \$100 million for public matching funds, as requested by the Public Campaign Finance Board (PCFB). We urge Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Speaker Heastie, and the members of the Legislature to include this full amount in this year's one-house budgets and the final state budget.

It is imperative to recognize that our democracy is at a critical crossroads. The influence of money in politics has grown to unprecedented levels across the country, drowning out the voices of everyday citizens and perpetuating a system that favors a select few. Campaigns have

transformed into high-stakes financial contests, often leaving qualified candidates—those who represent the diverse fabric of our communities—struggling to compete against well-funded opponents.

But thanks to the pathbreaking PCFP, the story is different in New York State. By providing essential funding to candidates who demonstrate grassroots support, the program ensures that public office in our state is accessible to all, regardless of their financial backing.

The PCFP's performance in 2024 was a resounding success, with over 70% of all candidate committees for State legislative offices opting into the program¹. This widespread participation, which reflects over three-quarters of the state's legislative districts and large majorities of Democrats and Republicans, demonstrates the program's effectiveness and acceptance across all geographic regions and political affiliations. With the next run of the program also including candidates running for statewide offices, such as governor, attorney general, and comptroller, it becomes even more critical that the program builds on this powerful momentum and gives voters across the Empire State the ability to engage in these vital elections meaningfully.

Providing \$114.5 million for this program is not merely a budgetary decision; it is a moral imperative and a strategic move toward empowering our democracy. While the 2024 data continues to be analyzed, anecdotally, in 2024, we saw candidates from underrepresented communities - including women, people of color, and working-class New Yorkers - run for office. These candidates brought vital insights and experiences that reflected the needs and values of their constituents, and many effectively campaigned in their districts with small-dollar donations. This approach ultimately cultivates more trust between elected officials and the public, reinforcing the importance of a diverseresponsive governance.

These benefits cannot be overstated. Since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision dismantled key limits on political spending, the wealthiest donors are increasingly dominating political campaigns. Large corporate contributors continue to spend huge sums on state elections, translating into disproportionate influence on our political process. New York's public financing program is currently the strongest response by any state to counter the influence of big money by amplifying small-dollar contributions. Without the program, the influx of big money in politics in New York will mute the voices of everyday New Yorkers, rendering them near speechless.

That's why, following its successful first cycle and in the wake of continued and vicious assaults on our democracy nationwide, we call on you to ensure that the PCFP gets the resources it needs to build the inclusive, representative democracy New Yorkers demand and deserve. We call on you to help the program prepare for the 2026 cycle and ensure it keeps delivering benefits to candidates and small, in-district donors alike.

¹ Public Campaign Finance Board, "2024 NYS Public Campaign Finance Program End of Cycle Report"

The funds requested are needed to support the program's run in 2026 and also implement the new campaign finance software system to better assist candidates and treasurers with program-related administrative tasks. Full funding will help ensure that the program continues its promise to strengthen our democracy by putting our political process back in the hands of everyday New Yorkers in our political process. It represents an investment in a democracy that delivers on issues that matter to all New Yorkers – not just the wealthiest few – from housing and jobs to healthcare and education.

In closing, Fair Elections for New York urges you to support the allocation of \$114.5 million for the PCFP. This investment is about more than just funding; it is about restoring faith in our democratic system, ensuring a government that reflects and serves all of us. Together, we can create a political landscape where every New Yorker has an equal opportunity to have their voice heard.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to working alongside you to build a more equitable democracy for all New Yorkers.