



To: Governor Cuomo, Members of the New York State Legislature, Public Campaign Financing Commissioners, and Interested Parties
From: Fair Elections for New York
Re: Polling Over Last Decade Shows New Yorkers Support Public Campaign Financing
Date: October 2, 2019

The idea that the public does not support public financing of elections is a myth. The majority of surveys show widespread support. The few outlier polls that have shown lower support have used poorly worded survey questions that fail to adequately describe the proposals under consideration and their benefits. This memo sets the record straight: Public polling over the past decade resoundingly indicates popular support for public campaign financing.

This matter is urgent. The New York Public Campaign Financing Commission will create a new campaign finance system all candidates will live by, by the end of 2019. It is critical that both the Commission, and the lawmakers and Governor who created it, understand the public's opinion about the creation of a system of public campaign finance and an overhaul of the campaign finance system. Every member of the New York Congressional Delegation, including our U.S. Senators, is in strong support of such a system and are committed to moving it on a national level. Here in New York, we have an opportunity to lead the nation.

Nationwide, Americans are increasingly concerned about the role of money in politics and more willing to back politicians who champion solutions to the big-money problem. It's no surprise then that in New York, a state with some of the worst campaign finance laws in the country, voters are more likely to support elected officials who back the creation of a public campaign financing system for New York State.

Polling Shows Support for Public Campaign Financing in New York

Past polling has found overwhelming support for small donor public financing in New York. Here are some examples from the past decade:

- A 2019 survey found that 78 percent of New Yorkers voters supported creating a small dollar matching system in the state budget, while majorities

said they were less likely to support legislators and the Governor if they did not pass public financing in the state budget. (Public Policy Polling, March 2019)¹

- A 2018 survey found that 90 percent of voters surveyed in swing districts nationwide including in New York's 11th congressional district covering Staten Island and part of Brooklyn and the 19th and 22nd congressional districts in upstate New York are more likely to support candidates who back plans to create a small donor matching system. (Global Strategy Group, August 2018)²
- A 2013 survey found 97 percent of New York voters say it is important for state leaders to address "reducing the influence of money in politics and ending corruption." Sixty-five percent support and 23 percent oppose "creating a system of public campaign financing in New York that would limit the size of political contributions to candidates for state office and provide public money to candidates to match those smaller contributions." (Global Strategy Group/Mercury, May 2013)³
- A 2012 survey showed "wide, broad, and deep" support for a comprehensive package of campaign financing reforms. By 79 to 8 percent, New York voters backed the proposal to create a small donor matching system, lower contribution limits, increase disclosure, and enforce campaign finance laws. (Lake Research, December 2012)⁴
- A 2012 survey found 61 percent of New York voters support "creating a system of public campaign financing in New York that would limit the size of political contributions to candidates and use state money to match smaller contributions made to candidates for state offices". (Siena College, December 2010)⁵
- A 2010 survey of New York voters found that 70 percent support public campaign financing. Even after hearing negative attacks on public campaign financing, 67 percent still support and support rises to 72 percent after

¹ Public Policy Polling surveyed 625 New York voters on March 27-28, 2019. The margin of error is +/- 3.9%. <https://fairelectionsny.org/new-poll-shows-huge-support-statewide-for-public-financing-of-elections>

² Spectrum News, "Campaign Finance Reform Supporters Tout Swing District Polls," March 19, 2019, <https://www.nystateofpolitics.com/2019/03/campaign-finance-reform-supporters-tout-swing-district-polls/>

³ Global Strategy Group and Mercury surveyed 604 likely 2014 voters in New York from April 29 to May 1, 2013. The margin of error is +/- 4%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Memo-GSG-Mercury-2013.pdf>

⁴ Lake Research Partners surveyed 504 New York voters from December 13 to 17, 2012. The margin of error is +/- 4.4%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Memo-PCAF-LRP-2012.pdf>

⁵ Siena College surveyed 671 likely New York State voters on August 14-19, 2012. The margin of error is +/- 3.8%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SNY-August-2012-Poll-Release.pdf>

hearing follow-up positive messaging. (Center for Working Families and the Brennan Center for Justice, June 2010)⁶

Polls Showing Opposition to Public Campaign Financing Are Outliers

Polling showing opposition to public campaign financing, like the recent Siena College survey that found New Yorkers oppose public campaign financing 63 to 23 percent,⁷ are outliers that result from poorly worded survey questions. Poll after poll has shown strong support for public campaign financing in New York State, including a past Siena which found 61 percent of New Yorkers support public campaign financing.⁸ Yet outliers arise when survey questions fail to adequately describe the public campaign financing proposals under consideration in Albany. These unfairly written polls are misleading and inaccurately represent how many New Yorkers support investing in our democracy through a small donor matching system.

Consider the difference between these two poll questions:

- **Siena 2012:** "Do you support or oppose creating a system of public campaign financing in New York that would limit the size of political contributions to candidates and use state money to match smaller contributions made to candidates for state offices?"
- **Siena 2019:** "Another action in this year's state budget was the creation [sic] of a commission to implement a system of public campaign financing for candidates for statewide and legislative races. The commission is required to put forward a plan for public campaign financing by December 1. Its plan will become law unless changed by the Legislature and Governor before the end of the year. This new public campaign finance system will cost the state up to one hundred million annually. Based on what you know, do you support or oppose the public campaign finance plan included in the state budget?"

⁶ The Center for Working Families and the Brennan Center for Justice surveyed 800 likely New York voters on June 8-9, 2010. The margin of error is +/- 3.5%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Memo-BCJ-CWF-2010.pdf>

⁷ Carl Campanile, "Taxpayers don't like footing the bill for publicly funded elections: poll," New York Post, April 16, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/04/16/voters-dont-like-price-tag-for-public-financing-of-elections-poll/>

⁸ Siena College surveyed 671 likely New York State voters on August 14-19, 2012. The margin of error is +/- 3.8%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SNY-August-2012-Poll-Release.pdf>

The 2012 survey explains the pertinent benefits of the program as well as the fact that it will use public funds. The 2019 survey detailed the cost of the program while failing to explain the benefits of that investment.

Not everyone knows the details of how public financing works yet when they are informed about what it does—including reducing the power of big money and giving small donors and under-represented New Yorkers a voice—they see that as a worthwhile investment in our democracy.

When you highlight the benefits of public campaign financing, it's a winning message. Lake Research Partners found that after hearing arguments on both sides, voters backed a package of campaign finance reforms including public campaign financing by 75 percent to 19 percent.⁹ The Center for Working Families and the Brennan Center for Justice found that support for public campaign financing rises from 70 percent to 72 percent after hearing both sides of the argument.¹⁰

It's also worth noting that the 2019 Siena question focuses on the creation of a commission to implement public campaign financing. Polling has shown that a majority of New Yorkers supported passing public campaign financing in the budget.¹¹ The survey response may also reflect a lack of support for the controversial matter of handing critical details to an unelected body.

New York Has a Chance to Lead the Nation on Campaign Finance Reform

Nationwide, big money in politics is a top issue for voters and small donor public financing is the best solution we have to counter the flood of secret, big money into our elections following Supreme Court decisions like *Citizens United*.¹² While trust in government is at near historic lows,¹³ polls continually show that money in politics is a top issue¹⁴ and that voters are more likely to support politicians who plan to address it.¹⁵

⁹ Lake Research Partners surveyed 504 New York voters from December 13 to 17, 2012. The margin of error is +/- 4.4%. <http://fairelectionsny.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Memo-PCAF-LRP-2012.pdf>

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¹² Brennan Center for Justice, "The Case for Small Donor Public Financing in New York," February 26, 2019, <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/small-donor-public-financing-ny>

¹³ Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019," April 11, 2019, <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

¹⁴ For example, a Gallup poll found corruption in Washington was the "most important" topic for 2018 candidates to discuss. See Dave Heller, "Gallup poll: Most see Congress as corrupt, beholden to special interests," *WHYY*, August 10, 2018, <https://whyy.org/segments/gallup-poll-most-see-congress-as-corrupt-beholden-to-special-interests/>

¹⁵ Greg Sargent, "How Democrats can make voters care about big money in politics," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2015/06/03/how-democrats-can-make-voters-care-about-big-money-in-politics/>

It is no surprise then that as soon as Democrats took control of the U.S. House of Representatives, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her colleagues prioritized democracy reforms, introducing the comprehensive democracy reform bill H.R. 1, including a 6-to-1 small donor match, as their first bill.¹⁶ The bill passed in the House of Representatives with 100 percent support from Democrats.

On the 2020 campaign trail, campaign finance reform has become a priority issue for many Democrats. Elizabeth Warren, Michael Bennet, Steve Bullock, Pete Buttigieg, Kirsten Gillibrand, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, and Marianne Williamson all pledged to make fighting corruption their first order of business.¹⁷

Democrats nationally see that taking on big money in politics and moving forward with small donor public financing is a winning issue. Here in New York, we have the chance to lead the nation and deliver what voters have been asking for: campaign finance reform that leads us to a government of, by, and for the people, not big donors. While reform is blocked at the national level, we have the chance to show them how it's done in New York.

¹⁶ Nancy Pelosi and John Sarbanes, "The Democratic majority's first order of business: Restore democracy," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-democratic-majoritys-first-order-of-business-restore-democracy/2018/11/25/9aeb3dbe-ece2-11e8-96d4-0d23f2aaad09_story.html

¹⁷ See Alexander Burns, "Seven 2020 Democrats Pledge to Focus First Bill on Fighting Corruption," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/29/us/politics/end-citizens-united-pledge.html>; and End Citizens United, "Reform First 2020: Day One," Sep 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N18IPiA7QuQ>