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THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS *of New York State*

PUBLIC HEARING ON CAMPAIGN PUBLIC FINANCING

TESTIMONY BEFORE

NEW YORK STATE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTIONS

March 20, 2019

Hearing Room A, Legislative Office Building, Albany, New York

Good afternoon. I am Laura Ladd Bierman, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New York State (League). The League is a non-partisan political organization working to promote civic responsibility through informed and active participation of citizens in government. We have 49 local leagues throughout the state registering and educating voters, on local and state issues. Advocacy has also been an important facet of League activity since our founding as an outgrowth of the women's suffrage movement 100 years ago. On behalf of the League, I want to thank Senator Myrie and this committee for this opportunity to speak about campaign finance reform and a small donor matching system for New York State.

For many years, New Yorkers have been frustrated by the deplorable condition of our state's campaign finance system and the outsized power of wealthy interests in Albany. Comprehensive campaign finance reform is the change New Yorkers so desperately need. For decades the League has tirelessly worked for this end. This legislature now has before it a historic opportunity to make sweeping improvements including a small donor matching program to our broken campaign finance system, a system which has for far too long undermined democracy and sown public distrust in government.

Specifically, the League has repeatedly advocated for the following reforms and strongly supports their inclusion in this year's budget. The New York City League was an early and strong proponent of public financing for city elections and the League has supported public financing in New York state elections for many years. Among the well-documented benefits of public financing are a greater diversity of candidates elected to office and an increase in the number of overall contributors, especially the number of small donors. However, we also believe that effective, independent and adequately funded enforcement, and reasonable limits on contributions, including contributions to parties, are also fundamental to reforming New York's broken campaign finance laws. They should not be viewed as mere additions to implementing a public financing system. New York cannot build a functional public financing system on top of the existing weak enforcement structure and sky-high contribution limits. Robust, independent, adequately funded enforcement, greater campaign finance restrictions, and public financing must all go hand in hand. The same independent board should administer the public finance system and all campaign finance laws.

We need to reduce all contribution limits to levels more consistent with federal limits, including hard money contributions to party committees. While we recognize that the Governor's proposed reductions are a significant reduction from current levels, by far the highest of any state in the country with limits, they need to be lower. We need to further reduce or eliminate contributions by all lobbyists and contractors doing business with the state in addition to those seeking contracts. In addition, we need to place reasonable limits on party housekeeping accounts and clarify the ban on personal use of campaign funds, including a ban on the use of contributions to pay expenses related to holding office, fines and attorney fees. New York should also require increased and more immediate reporting of campaign contributions, especially those made immediately prior to an election. There should be new reporting requirements for bundlers of contributions as well as reporting of a contributor's occupation and employer. In addition, there should be immediate disclosure of alleged violations of campaign finance laws and dispositions of enforcement actions.

Elected officials should be beholden to their constituents, not their large donors. We want to thank the Senate for including funding for a public financing system in their budget and encourage them to also enact strong reforms to ensure transparency in our elections and trust in our government.