COLLECTION IV — ELECTORAL REFORM

Campaign Finance Reform — Key Concepts

An overview of campaign finance law, public financing options, and reform efforts.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

Why campaign finance matters

Running for office costs money. Who gives that money, and how much, can affect who runs, who wins, and whose concerns get attention afterward.

Key terms

- **Contribution limits.** Caps on how much an individual or group can give a candidate. Federal limits are set by the FEC. New York sets its own limits for state and local races.
- **Disclosure.** Candidates and committees must report who gives and how money is spent. Federal reports are at fec.gov. New York State and local reports are filed with the State Board of Elections.
- **PACs.** Political action committees pool contributions to support candidates, subject to limits.
- **Super PACs.** Committees that can raise and spend unlimited amounts on independent spending, as long as they don't coordinate with candidates. They grew after the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision.
- **Dark money.** Political spending by groups, often nonprofits, that aren't required to disclose their donors.
- **Independent expenditures.** Spending to support or oppose a candidate that isn't coordinated with the campaign.

- **Public financing.** Programs that use public funds to support candidates, often by matching small donations.

Reform approaches

- **Stronger disclosure,** so voters can see who's paying for political messages.
- **Lower contribution limits** or limits on certain donors, such as businesses with government contracts.
- **Public financing and small-donor matching.** See *Small-Dollar Democracy*.
- **Stronger enforcement** of existing rules.
- **Constitutional amendments** to allow limits on independent spending, which the courts have struck down.

Debates

Supporters of reform argue that big money distorts democracy and gives large donors outsized influence. Opponents argue that political spending is protected speech, that limits help incumbents, and that public financing uses taxpayer money for candidates voters may oppose.

Follow the money yourself

Civest Sphere's **Board of Elections** dashboard, **Money Map** and **Congress Tracker** let you explore campaign finance data for Long Island races.

> OFFICIAL SOURCES
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> - Federal Election Commission (https://www.fec.gov)
> - NY State Board of Elections — Campaign Finance (https://elections.ny.gov)

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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