COLLECTION IV — ELECTORAL REFORM

Small-Dollar Democracy — Public Campaign Financing

How small-dollar and public financing programs work and why reformers believe they strengthen democracy.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

The idea

Small-donor public financing uses public funds to multiply small contributions from ordinary residents. A $25 donation might bring in hundreds of dollars in matching funds. The goal is to make small donors as valuable to candidates as large ones.

New York State's program

New York launched its **Public Campaign Finance Program** in November 2022, and it was first used in the 2024 elections.

- **Who can participate:** candidates for Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Comptroller, State Senate and State Assembly who opt in.
- **What's matched:** contributions of $5 to $250 from New York residents, and for legislative candidates, from residents of their district. The match uses a tiered formula that gives the most weight to the smallest dollars.
- **To qualify:** candidates must raise a minimum number of small contributions from in-district residents, and accept spending and contribution rules.
- **Who runs it:** the Public Campaign Finance Board within the State Board of Elections.

New York City's program

New York City has run a public matching program for city offices since the late 1980s. It matches small contributions from city residents at a high ratio, and has been a model for programs elsewhere, including the state's.

Arguments for

- Candidates spend more time with constituents and less with wealthy donors.
- People without access to big donors can run competitive campaigns.
- More residents become donors, and engaged participants.
- It may reduce the influence of large contributors.

Arguments against

- It uses taxpayer money, including for candidates some taxpayers oppose.
- Programs can be complex and costly to administer.
- Fraud and misuse require strong oversight.
- Outside spending by super PACs isn't affected.

Learn more

Check the Public Campaign Finance Board for current rules, thresholds and payments, and Civest Sphere's **Board of Elections** dashboard for local campaign finance data.

> OFFICIAL SOURCES
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> - NY State Public Campaign Finance Board (https://pcfb.ny.gov)
> - NYC Campaign Finance Board (https://www.nyccfb.info)

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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