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Poll Finds New Yorkers Overwhelmingly Support Public Financing of Elections

Believe Public Financing Will Save Taxpayers Money Since State Legislators Now Award Billions in Favors to Special Interests

Albany -- In a new poll, New Yorkers of all political stripes show overwhelming support for public financing of elections for statewide and legislative offices, even in tough times for the State budget. The poll by Zogby International found that three-out-of-four New Yorkers support a proposal, often called Clean Elections, which would provide a limited amount of public dollars to candidates who do not accept private contributions of more than \$100.

Notably, the poll found that New Yorkers believe that public financing will save taxpayers money because voters believe that under the current system, special interests that make campaign contributions get tax breaks and favors that cost consumers and ordinary taxpayers billions of dollars.

“New Yorkers are convinced that campaign contributions from special interests get tax breaks and favors that costs consumers and ordinary taxpayers billions of dollars,” according to Richard Kirsch, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York. “The poll found Democrats, Republicans and Independents, from upstate and downstate, all agree by large majorities that public financing of elections would save taxpayers money and make state government accountable to voters instead of big corporations.”

The poll also found that the public financing proposal would increase their trust in state legislators and make it more likely that legislators would put the concerns of voters before lobbyists and campaign contributors.

Governor David A. Paterson is a long time champion of the Clean Elections public financing proposal tested in the poll. Paterson was the prime sponsor of the Clean Elections beginning in 1999 until he left the State Senate to become Lieutenant Governor.

The poll found that even when voters were presented with the harshest attacks on public financing – *“will lead to higher taxes; force cutbacks in important programs like education and health care; welfare for politicians; paying for fringe candidates or negative campaign ads; a waste of our tax money”* – voters still overwhelmingly believe that public financing is the right thing to do.

After hearing the most forceful arguments against Clean Elections public financing and the arguments for the proposal, the support increased with four-out-of-five New Yorkers saying they favored public financing.

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“We asked the toughest questions we could in this poll – all the attacks that we hear against public financing – and New Yorkers overwhelmingly rejected them all,” said Kirsch. “The big message is that New Yorkers are convinced that their state legislators are giving away the store to big corporations and special interests, costing consumers and taxpayers billions of dollars.”

The poll of likely voters, taken in early April found that:

- 74% of voters favor the public financing proposal, including 80% of Independents; 72% of Republicans and 73% of Democrats. Upstate, 79% of voters support the proposal as do 76% of suburban voters.
- At a time most voters (59%) believe that state legislators are not doing what is right for residents of New York, half of voters (49%) say that if the proposal were to become law it would increase their trust in state legislators.
- Three-out-of-four voters (74%) believe that the proposal would make it more likely that state legislators put the concerns of voters before that of lobbyists and campaign contributors.
- More than four-out-of-five voters support campaign finance proposals that would limit spending (83% support) and limit the size of contributions to candidates (80% support).

The poll also found that New Yorkers believe that the only way to run for office is to become beholden to wealthy special interests or be rich and that the Clean Elections proposal would level the playing field so that average people can run for office and represent average voters rather than special interests.

Clean Elections has the support of a growing number of organizations, including New York State United Teachers, the State's biggest union which has one of the State's biggest PACs. Alan B. Lubin, NYSUT Executive Vice-President said, “NYSUT supports comprehensive campaign finance reform and the principles of “clean money, clean elections” advanced by Citizen Action and other good government groups. Simply put, NYSUT wants fairer elections, run on the issues and funded by the people, not big outside interests.”

Other supporters of Clean Elections include the Working Families Party, the League of Women Voters, the Communications Workers of America, Metropolitan Council on Housing, Housing Works, Hunger Action Network of NYS, and dozens of grassroots clubs and organizations statewide.

The New York State Assembly is expected to take up a public financing proposal before the close of the legislative session in June. Senator Malcolm Smith, the Democrat Senate Minority Leader, is the prime sponsor of the proposal in the State Senate. Senate Majority Leader Republican Joseph Bruno has long stated his opposition to public financing of state legislative elections.

The exact description of the campaign finance proposal tested in the poll was: “Under a new proposal, New York State candidates would no longer raise money from private sources, other than contributions of \$5 to \$100 from NY voters. Instead, each candidate would receive a set amount of money from a publicly financed election fund. Spending by candidates would be limited to the amount they receive from the fund, and they would have to follow regular financial reporting requirements.”

The poll by Zogby International, of 770 likely New York voters, was taken from April 4th through April 6th and has a margin of error of +/- 3.6 percentage points. The poll was commissioned by the Public Policy and Education Fund of New York, a research group affiliated with Citizen Action of New York. The full poll results are available at the Citizen Action of New York website: www.citizenactionny.org.