

**Link:**

<https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/unexpected-campaign-finance-tweak-ny-democrats-20316855.php>



## **Democrats made public money for campaigns even more generous than expected**

A new program made it possible to get state money to boost candidates' contributions

By Emilie Munson, Staff writer

May 9, 2025



The state budget adopted Friday includes a provision to increase taxpayer dollars funding election campaigns. Some lawmakers said new rules on the use of those funds are "rigging" the system.

Lori Van Buren/Times Union

ALBANY — A state budget bill passed by the New York Legislature Wednesday included unforeseen changes to the public campaign finance system that could help candidates collect more taxpayer money for their campaigns while also leaning on bigger donors.

The numerous changes were hammered out in private with no public input. The day after the bill passed there was still confusion about what the changes will mean. Some also are arguing the new rules undermine the program that was intended to reduce the influence of big donors and help grassroots candidates wage viable campaigns.

On Friday, the good-government group Reinvent Albany issued a statement slamming lawmakers for changing the rules of a system that was intended to give voters more choices and lessen the influence in elections of special interests and "big money."

The group said the changes added to the budget in secret drastically increase the size of contributions eligible for public matching funds "and boosts the public match in ways that turn the hard-won public campaign matching system into an incumbency protection program."

The bill was among a stack of budget legislation that Gov. Kathy Hochul signed on Friday. Her office did not respond to questions from the Times Union about the campaign finance changes.

According to four legislators interviewed by the Times Union, the bill allows candidates to get taxpayer dollars to match the first \$250 of a contribution up to \$1,050 that's made by a donor before the primary. If the donor makes a second contribution of up to \$1,050 toward the candidate's general election campaign, the candidate can get a second taxpayer funded match. During the 2024 election, candidates could only receive no more than \$250 from one donor across the entire cycle to unlock matching public funds.

But others disagree that's what the changes will do. Marina Pino, counsel in the Brennan Center's Elections and Government Program, and Karen A. Wharton, democracy coalition coordinator for Citizen Action of New York, said they believe the bill would result in a system where a donor's \$250 contribution would only be matched once across the entire election cycle — as opposed to once for the primary and once for the general election.

Pino, Wharton and other elections experts pored over the bill Wednesday and Thursday, dissecting the language and trying to ascertain if it would do what lawmakers described.

“This language is pretty confusing,” said Pino, who has studied the New York Public Campaign Finance program and similar programs in other states. “We’re not really sure what the drafters intended to do here. We’re hearing conflicting things.”

Tom Speaker, legislative director for Reinvent Albany, said the new provision “undermines the program’s goal of empowering small donors.”

“Two thousand dollars is not a small donation, but now the state will treat it as such,” Speaker said.

Republican state Sen. James Tedisco questioned the intent of the changes in a debate about the budget bill on Wednesday before the vote. Tedisco, who represents parts of the Capital Region, voted against the budget bill.

“The goal was to take big money out of campaigns. Now what you have done is kind of played the system here,” he said. “The fact that good government groups are opposed tells you that it is kind of hypocrisy to increase the donation levels when using the argument that you want to take big money out of government.”

Assemblywoman MaryJane Shimsky, Democrat from Westchester County, predicts the change will only affect a “handful” of candidates per year who have both competitive primaries and general election races — like she did in 2024. Candidates must have an opponent in an election to qualify for public funds, among other requirements.

Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, a New York City Democrat who used the system in 2024, feels the change was made with good intentions.

“In some districts, especially in the Hudson Valley and other places, there is sometimes a competitive primary and then there is a competitive general (election),” she said. “Folks upstate, they have to do a double push ... all that is very expensive. People were struggling with running out of money before the general.”



Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher supports changes made in the state budget to a public campaign finance program. Other lawmakers contend the program is being exploited and wasting money.

Will Waldron/Times Union

State Sen. James Skoufis, an Orange County Democrat who proposed reforms to the public campaign finance system in a prior bill, said he “likely” would have voted against the changes included in the budget if they were in stand-alone legislation.

“I’m not defending that,” he said, when asked about the provision supposedly allowing candidates to collect a second match of public funds if a contributor gives another \$250 to a campaign after the primary. “There is very little that I am going to defend about the public campaign finance system that’s been set up.”

During Wednesday’s Senate floor debate, Skoufis told his fellow lawmakers that it was a “missed opportunity to fix a deeply flawed public campaign finance system.”

The system was first used in 2024 by [nearly 200 candidates](#). There is a maximum amount of public funds each candidate is able to collect per election. The new provisions mean candidates could hit that max with a smaller number of donors.

The bill also subtracts any public campaign funds unused by a candidate during the primary from the total they are eligible to collect during the general election.

Another change will affect fundraising for Hochul’s reelection campaign. The legislation says gubernatorial candidates and their lieutenant governors will be able to work together

to meet eligibility requirements and amass contributions for public matching funds during the 2026 campaign instead of doing so separately.

And instead of each being eligible to reel in up to \$3.5 million in public funds for the primary, their collective campaigns could qualify to receive up to \$3.5 million. That aligns with another budget change establishing that gubernatorial and lieutenant governor candidates will [run as a ticket](#) instead of holding an open primary to pick the lieutenant governor candidate.

The bill also allows candidates running again to [hold onto money for future campaigns](#) — or for expenses associated with holding office — instead of paying it back to the Public Campaign Finance Board. It includes changes to the schedule by which the state pays out public money to campaigns. That’s something many 2024 candidates who used the system said was needed.

The changes are expected to increase futures costs of the program, which is fully funded by the state budget.

State Sen. Kristen Gonzalez, a New York City Democrat and chair of the Elections Committee, noted the program spent about \$35 million in 2024, only about a third of what was appropriated.

Assemblyman Steve Hawley, chairman of the Republican Assembly Campaign Committee, said in a written statement it’s “ironic” that Democrats pitching an affordability budget are sending more taxpayer money to political campaigns.

“Raising the limit on what funds qualify for public matching and allowing \$50,000 to be rolled over each year represent changes that are in direct opposition to their intended purpose of the program,” Hawley said. “Spending public dollars on political mailers, consultants, and advertisers was always questionable. The program clearly isn’t improving over time.”

Brian Kolb, a Republican appointee to the Public Campaign Finance Board, said the board will follow whatever changes the governor and Legislature approve, but he thinks they amount to a “help-the-incumbent protection plan.” The board has not yet scrutinized the bill in-depth.

Numerous candidates from both parties used the program in 2024. Several who were [interviewed by the Times Union](#) called it a “game changer” and said that they would not have been able to mount a viable campaign without it.

Gallagher said the funds allowed her to pay her campaign staff a fair wage and afford a campaign office instead of using her apartment. She noted the increased cost of the

program was worth it. In her view, it allows working-class people a chance to win elections and to shake up state government to benefit average New Yorkers.



“These are \$100 million in taxpayer funds while New Yorkers are homeless on the streets of every community,” state Sen. James Skoufis said during a debate on the bill. “I think it is a shame that we did not tighten up this program and make sure that these funds are going to credible candidates.”

Will Waldron/Times Union

In contrast, Skoufis would repeal the whole system if he could. He believes the threshold to qualify for public funds is too low, allowing candidates with little shot of winning the general election to rake in hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars.

“That you only need 150 unique donors in a Senate district of over 100,000 voters and over 300,000 total individuals and that is somehow supposed to be a demonstration of viability and public support for your campaign is patently absurd,” he said. He added that under the system, candidates would go to members of the same family or party members for repeat contributions instead of being encouraged to garner a broader base of grassroots support. He chastised lawmakers for pouring more money into the system.

“These are \$100 million in taxpayer funds while New Yorkers are homeless on the streets of every community,” Skoufis said during a Senate debate on the bill. “I think it is a shame that we did not tighten up this program and make sure that these funds are going to credible candidates.”

May 9, 2025



**Emilie Munson**

DATA REPORTER



Emilie Munson is a data reporter for the Times Union. She previously covered federal politics in Washington, D.C., for the Times Union and Hearst Connecticut Media. Emilie also has worked as a state capitol reporter for Hearst Connecticut Media and as an education reporter for the Greenwich Time. Her investigative reporting has won state and national awards.

**Link:**

<https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/n-y-candidates-broke-recent-spending-records-20368047.php>



## **NY candidates broke spending records in first year of state-funded matching program**

Democrats changed program rules for 2026 in ways that could spur more campaign spending and influence of big donors

By Emilie Munson, Data Reporter

June 15, 2025



The state's public campaign finance program got its first test in 2024 by legislative candidates. Collectively, they spent more than they had in over a decade on their campaigns. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

ALBANY — Legislative candidates in New York spent more money last year than in any election in the past 25 years except one, in part due to a new program that poured millions of taxpayer dollars into state Senate and Assembly campaigns.

Altogether, legislative candidates spent nearly \$90 million on their campaigns in 2024, the largest sum since 2010 when accounting for inflation, a Times Union analysis of state Board of Elections data found. That was \$15 million more than legislative candidates spent in 2022, similarly adjusted for inflation.

In 2010 — the year Republicans recovered control of the state Senate after two years of Democratic leadership — legislative candidates spent about \$16 million more than 2024 candidates in inflation-adjusted figures.

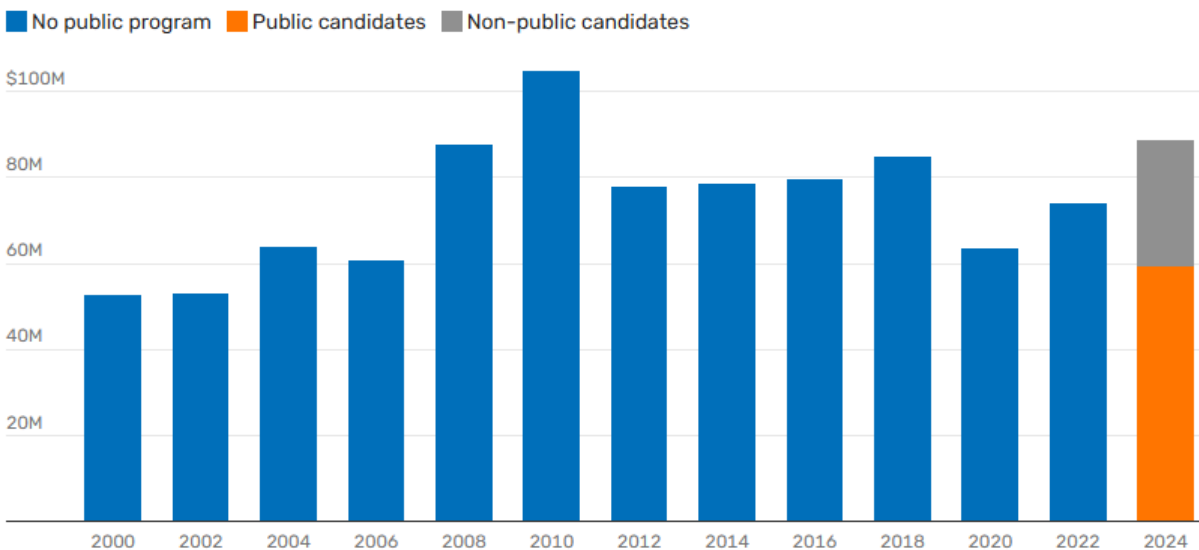
Under the new state program, candidates in certain races collected small contributions from donors in their districts to unlock an infusion of state matching funds for their campaigns.

The program's stated intention was to shift power away from wealthy donors, corporations and special interests, and encourage candidates to focus their campaigns on the everyday New Yorkers in their districts. Lawmakers who supported the initiative said they wanted to empower candidates from working-class backgrounds, without a Rolodex of wealthy supporters, to have a shot at winning when running for public office.

The program has had an unintended consequence: It has helped make legislative campaigns more expensive.

## 2024 state legislative spending was highest since 2010

Hover over the bars to see how much was spent each year.



All spending figures are inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars. Spending includes expenditures, qualified expenditures and transfers out.

Chart: Emilie Munson / Times Union • Source: [New York State Board of Elections](#)

Candidates did collect more small donations from people in their districts. But the spigot of cash from big donors has continued to flow to certain candidates who are layering that money on top of the new state funds in the hopes of gaining an advantage. Then during the recent state budget negotiations, Gov. Kathy Hochul and Democrats in the Legislature quietly slipped in [changes to the program](#) that in 2026 will allow candidates to cash checks from bigger donors and still collect matching state money — a change criticized by many Republicans and good government groups.

The program has no cap on spending, unlike some similar programs in other states and jurisdictions.

New York's Public Campaign Finance Program, as the small-donor matching system is known, paid out about \$35 million to legislative candidates in 2024. Some candidates may return unused funds to the program. But the data suggests nearly 40% of all money spent by legislative candidates came from the state.

“It’s great in the sense that it empowers average people to give to candidates and support the candidates that align with their values, but it does promote the growth of overall campaign spending,” said Alec Lewis, vice president and director of campaigns for the consulting firm O’Donnell & Associates.

Paul S. Ryan, executive director of the New York City Campaign Finance Board, which also operates a matching funds program, said the source of money for campaigns is more important than the total amount spent.

“If at the state level, for example, the increase in spending that you’re observing is attributable to or roughly correlates with the amount of public funds that are entering the system, then that doesn’t surprise me, and it’s not alarming,” he said. “Public dollars are the best dollars to have in campaign coffers.”

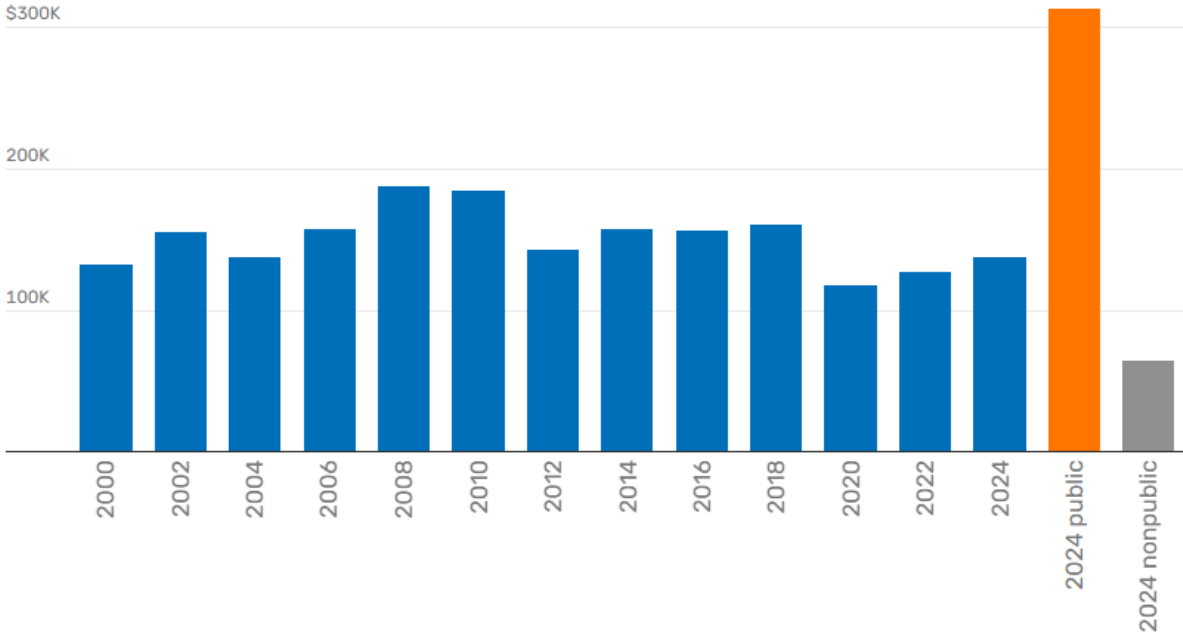
New York already had some of the most expensive state legislative races in the country, according to data collected by OpenSecrets, a national nonprofit that tracks money in politics.

Spending on New York legislative races has been trending upward for years, as inflation drives up the cost of goods and services and outside spending muddies races, experts said. The new state program appears to have accelerated that increase. There’s likely several causes: The program helps some candidates access more money than they could raise before; it may prompt more people to choose to run; and some candidates continue to rely on big donors in addition to their matching funds to succeed.

The average legislative candidate spent more campaign money in 2024 than in 2022 or 2020, but less than many prior state elections, when spending is adjusted for inflation.

## The average legislative candidate's spending by year

Blue bars show all candidates. Orange represents candidates who received public funds in 2024. Gray represents 2024 candidates who did not get public funds.



All public candidates have an opponent, which increases spending. All spending is inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars. Spending includes expenditures, qualified expenditures and transfers out.

Chart: Emilie Munson / Times Union • Source: [New York State Board of Elections](#)

## How it works

The program allows candidates for state legislative and other state offices who are running against an opponent to get taxpayer money to match small donations. Legislative candidates must raise a few thousand dollars from residents in their districts to qualify for the program. In 2024, in-district contributions up to \$250 were matched by taxpayer funds, in some cases up to \$12 from the state for every \$1 raised.

Senate candidates can collect up to \$375,000 from the state for their primary and general elections if they are opposed in both races. Likewise, Assembly candidates can get up to \$175,000 per election. Candidates with no primary opponent can also get tens of thousands of dollars if the other party has a primary in their race.

Last year, 190 candidates received funds through the program.

Democrats Sarah Anker of Suffolk County and Kim Keiserman of Nassau County each said the program influenced them to run for the Senate. Both felt they couldn't raise enough money on their own without it.

At the start her campaign, Anker called, texted and emailed thousands of her contacts asking for small donations. Soon, the former county legislator had amassed enough to qualify for the program and then collect the maximum amount of public funds for Senate candidates.

“For me, it was a game-changer,” Anker said. “When people would donate, they were invested in my campaign, and then they would volunteer and I could count on them for their vote.”

The program also allows GOP candidates, many of whom have been outspent in recent years due to the party's minority status in the Legislature, to have more spirited campaigns, political operatives told the Times Union.

“Having access to much larger sums of money for challenger races was very important,” said Matt Nelligan, CEO of the campaign consulting firm Syndicate Strategies and previously a GOP Senate staffer. “You could be in the category where you were only being outspent two to one, maybe 2.5 to one. The previous cycle (before the matching program launched), we were being outspent 10 to one.”

[A report by the Brennan Center for Justice](#), which has advocated for public campaign financing, found more New Yorkers made small contributions in their district in 2024 than years prior and candidates relied less on big donors.



The Public Campaign Finance Board said in its end of cycle report the majority of the 336 candidates who ran for Assembly in 2024 and the 129 who ran for Senate registered for the public campaign finance program. 190 candidates across both chambers received public funds. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

## **No spending cap**

Unlike the New York City public financing program, which has been in place since 1988, the state program doesn't cap how much participants can spend on their campaigns.

The city's limits help keep down the total amount of spending in elections "in a way that makes running for office more accessible for everyday New Yorkers," said Ryan, who heads the program.

"We have high levels of participation, almost complete participation in our program at the city level, so everyone is agreeing to limit the spending arms race," Ryan said. He declined to express an opinion on whether the state should add a spending cap.

Thirteen other states have public campaign finance programs, according to [the Brennan Center](#). Six of those cap participant spending.

"Historically, public financing programs have expenditure limits; at the same time, this is not the most practical policy decision in a post-Citizens United world," said Marina Pino, counsel in the Brennan Center's Elections and Government Program, referring to a 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down limits on how much money a corporation can spend in support of a political campaign. The decision also allowed businesses and other groups to spend unlimited amounts, often through entities called super PACs.

The Brennan Center has opposed a spending cap for New York's program to help candidates contend with independent expenditures in their races.

Outside groups made about \$22 million in independent expenditures in New York legislative races in 2022, down from about \$50 million in 2020 and 2018 when adjusted for inflation, according to Open Secrets. (Data on 2024's outside spending totals is not yet available from Open Secrets.)

## **Generous and well-resourced**

Candidates in the state program can continue to raise money from big donors, corporations, unions, special interests and lobbyists on top of the matching funds they collect. That makes some people worry that while the program helps more people afford to run, candidates with deep-pocketed connections still have the edge — and everyone is paying more for elections, including the state.

In 2024, more than a dozen candidates who received public funds also collected over \$100,000 from large donors who gave more than \$1,000, campaign finance data shows. Some of those candidates and nearly a dozen others getting matching funds also amassed more than \$100,000 from PACs, unions or corporations.

Good campaigns will assume their opponents are going to qualify for the state program and raise more money from large donors to get an upper hand, explained Lewis, a consultant with years of experience in New York state Senate campaigns.

“It’s a new floor,” he said.

Political consultant Joe Bonilla agrees the program opens the door for more candidates, but he doesn't think it creates a level playing field for them.

Bonilla, the managing partner and senior media director for the firm Relentless Awareness, echoed Ryan's metaphor to describe the spending increase: “We’ve created this arms race — we’re not really solving the problem.”

Former state Sen. Elijah Reichlin-Melnick, a Rockland County Democrat who ran unsuccessfully for reelection in 2024, said any reasonably competent candidate can qualify for the program, so the money becomes a new “base” for elections.

The top sum a Senate candidate can get in public funds, \$375,000, is “enough to have a campaign and to get some message out, but if you want to have a well-run campaign in a competitive race, certainly raising more than that is essential,” Reichlin-Melnick said. Paying for mailers, online ads and especially TV is incredibly expensive. “It’s not because spending is unusually lavish.”

Anker, from Suffolk County, also said candidates “definitely need more” than what the program offers if they want to compete. Her campaign spent nearly \$1.4 million in 2024, the third most of any legislative candidate last year.

She pointed out the money from the program helps candidates raise additional cash more easily.

“When you get \$100,000 or \$200,000 into your campaign account, contributors will take you more seriously and will be more likely to contribute to your campaign,” Anker said.

Candidates who received public money for their campaigns primarily spent the cash on TV advertising, consultants, other professional services, mailings and palm cards.

Numerous candidates spent tens of thousands of dollars — and a handful of them more than \$100,000 — to help them raise money from small and large donors. That money was

often spent on consultants who manage fundraising and events, which are often used to court large donors.

Sen. James Skoufis, an Orange County Democrat, spent nearly \$45,000 on fundraising at Citi Field, home of the Mets. Emma Fuentes, a spokeswoman for Skoufis, said the campaign anticipates paying back a surplus to the state that is equal to or greater than the amount of public funds it received. That's because the volumes of cash Skoufis raised in addition to his public funds — much from political committees and unions — greatly exceeded his overall campaign spending.

Sen. Pete Harckham, a Democrat from the Putnam County area, spent more than \$15,000 on fundraising events at Yankee Stadium.

“Special interest groups have spent millions of dollars fighting my environmental legislation and trying to get me out of office,” Harckham said. “Raising money so I can continue my work as an elected leader is a necessary undertaking.”



State Sen. Pete Harckham, seen here speaking on the Senate floor, said he was proud of all the grassroots support his campaign received from small donors in his district. "The public match program, thankfully, serves to level the playing field for all candidates, including my opponent, who received this funding as well," he said. Harckham's campaign received the maximum amount of public funds for the general election and fundraised additional cash from other sources. (AP Photo/Kena Betancur)

Republican state Sen. Stephen Chan of Brooklyn, who unseated a Democrat in 2024, spent nearly \$32,000 on a fundraiser at a local dim sum restaurant, campaign finance filings show. He declined to comment.

Nassau County's Keiserman collected \$740,000 in public funds, more than any other candidate last year. The Democrat dropped about \$17,000 at the Manhasset Bay Yacht Club on a fundraiser to kick off her campaign. The vast majority of the money she spent on her campaign came from the taxpayer-funded program. She said she hosted the event to celebrate qualifying for the maximum amount of public funds for her primary race and connect with her supporters.

“The money issue is the most daunting thing for first-time candidates, especially in a media market like this one,” Keiserman said. “I felt (the program) was designed for me and a campaign like mine.”

### **The influence of the rich**

While money is indisputably a critical factor, it’s a political myth that the candidate with the most cash always wins, pointed out Brendan Glavin, director of Insights for OpenSecrets.

“Historically, challengers who beat incumbents in Congress raised less than the incumbents did,” he said. “You don’t need to have the most money, but you need to have a certain amount in order to make yourself competitive.”

Both Anker and Reichlin-Melnick outspent the Republican incumbents they were running against (Anker by about \$1 million) but lost in the general election.

Tom Speaker, legislative director for Reinvent Albany, a nonprofit focused on government reforms that advocated for the creation of the New York Public Campaign Finance Program, said it’s a “weakness” in the system that candidates can still rake in big sums from wealthy donors and PACs while collecting state funds from the program. There is a contribution limit constraining how much each individual wealthy donor can give to a candidate, but for Senate and gubernatorial candidates, those limits are some of the highest in the country, Speaker said.

Also, those donors can give unlimited money to super PACs as long as the outside groups don’t coordinate directly with the candidates running.

“It still allows for too much potential influence,” Speaker said. “It’s definitely not a perfect system.”

David Primo, professor of Political Science and Business Administration at the University of Rochester, said wealthy individuals and special interest groups have levers of power

beyond their campaign contributions. Their influence may remain even if their contributions fall slightly.

“These interest groups not only make campaign contributions, but they are also active in lobbying. They have existing relationships with staff members,” Primo said. “I wouldn’t expect to see much of a change in the influence of special interest groups as a result of public financing.”

## **New changes**

State lawmakers made a number of changes to the Public Campaign Finance Program in the most recent budget before legislative candidates try it for the second time in 2026 — the first year in which gubernatorial hopefuls can tap into the program.

In a major shift, the budget allows candidates to get taxpayer dollars to match the first \$250 of a contribution up to \$1,050 that’s made by a donor before the primary. If the donor makes a second contribution of up to \$1,050 toward the candidate’s general election campaign, the candidate can get a second taxpayer-funded match. That would be a generous change from the 2024 election, when candidates could receive no more than \$250 from one donor across the entire cycle to unlock matching public funds.

But others have disagreed that’s what the changes will do, and said the budget language would result in a system where a donor’s \$250 contribution would only be matched once across the entire election cycle.

Kathleen McGrath, a spokeswoman for the state Board of Elections, said guidance and interpretations on that language is not available from the Public Campaign Finance Board yet.

Some Democrats defended the move as necessary to help a small number of candidates who have competitive primaries and general elections.

Keiserman said the change would have helped her campaign avoid making so many refunds for those who gave slightly more than \$250 across the primary and general elections.

[Some Republicans and Reinvent Albany slammed the changes](#) as undermining the program’s intent to empower small donors and creating an “incumbency protection program.”



In a debate about changes to the public campaign finance system tucked in the state budget, Sen. James Tedisco said, “The goal was to take big money out of campaigns. Now what you have done is kind of played the system here.” Will Waldron/Times Union

Republican state Sen. James Tedisco of Saratoga County called it “hypocrisy to increase the donation levels when using the argument that you want to take big money out of government.”

*Chris Hippensteel contributed to this report.*

June 15, 2025



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## **NY public campaign program fuels spending for political consultants**

By Emilie Munson, Staff writer

July 18, 2025



Libby Post, center, often works with Democrats running for local offices, like the county officials surrounding her in this photo from the June 2024 primary. But last year, she received an influx of new interest in her services from state legislative candidates running in a six-way primary.

Will Waldron/Times Union

ALBANY — When Republican Jim VanBrederode launched his bid for state Senate in 2024, he unwittingly ignited two campaigns.

The first, of course, was his run for state Legislature. But the second was a fierce contest among political consultants and other businesses who wanted VanBrederode to hire them.

“Every day I would go to the mailbox, and I would be getting fliers from this company, that company,” VanBrederode remembered.

This was a new experience for VanBrederode. He ran for Assembly in 2022 in the Rochester area, but it was a smaller campaign with limited money to spend, and he said he did most of the work “in house” with volunteers.

But in 2024, VanBrederode, like many candidates, qualified for a new state program that would give his campaign taxpayer dollars to run for office, if he raised small donations from people in his district. Armed with more campaign cash than he had in 2022, Van Brederode hired a campaign consultant for the first time.

He was not alone. New York’s new public campaign finance program has triggered big business for political strategists, fundraisers, accountants and advertisers. Legislative candidates in New York [spent more money last year](#) than in any election in the past 25 years, except one when accounting for inflation, and much of that money flowed to the legion of professionals who orchestrate campaigns behind the scenes.

Spending on bookkeeping by state legislative candidates shot up 86% from 2022 to 2024, the Times Union found. Polling increased by 18%. Payments for “professional services” leaped 17%.

As legislative candidates spent nearly \$8 million more on television, print, radio, online and mail advertising in 2024 than the prior election, work boomed for political consultants who crafted their campaign messages and designed and delivered their ads.

Legislative candidates spent at least \$10.4 million on consulting fees and retainers in 2024, more than anything else except television advertisements. But the true amount of money that went to consultants in 2024 is hard to calculate because payments to the professionals cut across multiple categories like advertising, fundraising and polling.

Political consultant Joe Bonilla said he observed a “feeding frenzy for firms to find John Q. Public who is running for office, who met the (public program’s) threshold” in 2024. With

the state publishing lists of candidates who entered the program, there were people reaching out from everywhere to work with them, said Bonilla, the managing partner and senior media director for the firm Relentless Awareness.



Joe Bonilla, a political consultant, observed a frenzy of businesses trying to win contracts with public campaign finance candidates, he said. He is also co-founder of Motor Oil Coffee in Albany.

Jim Franco/Times Union

Consultant Libby Post said local candidates participating in the state program in 2024 came to her for services, particularly those in [the six-way primary](#) to fill the Assembly seat vacated by state Sen. Pat Fahy.

“I felt like the girl that everyone wanted to take to the prom,” said Post, founder of Progressive Elections, a consulting firm in the Albany area. “I got calls from almost every Assembly candidate in the 109<sup>th</sup> District, and I made my choice.”

The fundamentals of what happened are pretty simple. Used for the first time in 2024, the New York Public Campaign Finance Program paid candidates state money to match small contributions they raised from donors in their districts. With this boost, the program helped more candidates run for office. It also helped candidates collect more money to spend on their campaigns than they otherwise might have had — particularly for first-time candidates and challengers lacking connections to big donors and special interests.

As a result, participating candidates “have increased resources that allow them to do more outreach and communication that they need assistance doing,” said Mark Streb, a

consultant at Deep Blue Politics and chair of the Rensselaer County Democratic Committee. Candidates who couldn't afford much of these services before have now turned to professionals to get their message out.



Mark Streb is the chairman of the Rensselaer County Democratic Committee and a consultant for Deep Blue Politics.

Carole Weaver/Rensselaer County Democratic Committee

State Sen. James Skoufis, who has [criticized the program](#), has blasted it as “a massive taxpayer-funded giveaway to consultants.”

John Kaehny, executive director of Reinvent Albany, a group that backs the program, said the boost for campaign businesses is no surprise.

“We fully expected lots of money from the public match would go to various campaign consultants because that’s what campaigns do,” he said. “The nature of political campaigns is they are very reliant on political consultants because you can’t keep a campaign staff on payroll in between elections.”

## **Accounting boom**

The program introduced a few new dynamics. It came with hefty paperwork for campaigns, which had to track loads of data on their contributors and preserve documentation on how they spent the funds they received. Some candidates said this made them spend more on campaign accounting.

Fahy, the state senator, said she hired a campaign treasurer for the first time in 12 years of campaigning, instead of relying on a volunteer, due to what she described as the program's burdensome reporting requirements.

Kim Van Atta of Delaware County was a volunteer treasurer for Democratic campaigns in multiple elections before 2024. He volunteered to do the books for a state Senate candidate using the public program last year. Since then, he said, he has been "going crazy" juggling time-consuming filings, difficult rules and frequent back-and-forths with auditors. He eventually asked to be compensated by the campaign for the hours and hours of work required.

"Treasurers have it hard this time, much harder than they ever had," Van Atta said. "I'm not doing this in 2026."

The shift away from volunteer treasurers is a business opportunity for compliance-oriented firms.

Midas Kenkyuu, a small management consulting firm in Virginia, handled the books of two state Senate hopefuls in New York in 2024, working in the state for the first time after being referred to those campaigns. Now, the [firm's website highlights](#) its expertise in compliance with the New York Public Campaign Finance Program. Donald Garrett, the firm's principal, said he hopes this will be an expanding part of his business going forward.

"Especially as programs like this expand, people need support and good support, too," he said.

## **The challengers**

Like VanBrederode, the Republican with the full mailbox, Democrat Michael Bobseine remembers getting a flood of messages from consulting firms wanting to run his campaign or do polling for him, he said.

"I was getting so many emails, it was hilarious," recalled Bobseine, who challenged a Republican for an open Assembly seat in a heavily GOP district near Buffalo.



New York's new public campaign finance program has triggered big business for political strategists, fundraisers, accountants and advertisers.

Will Waldron/Times Union

Not every candidate had this experience, and some candidates who already had their team selected just ignored the outreach, they said.

But several consultants said the program created new opportunities to work with candidates who were not incumbents and finally had the funds to pay.

“The fact that there were more candidates opened the door for more outreach to firms,” said Doug Forand, founding partner at Red Horse Strategies, one of the largest Democratic consulting firms in the state.

“There are some newer firms that are looking to build themselves up, and they do good work. Certainly, they saw opportunities there, especially in challenge races,” Forand added, while noting that Red Horse’s existing relationships with many candidates often meant they were working with incumbents.

Vince Casale, a GOP consultant leading the firm The Casale Group, noted the new dynamics created by the program have shifted the game for incumbents, too. Now up against better-funded opponents, they’re amplifying their message and spending more on advertising.

Adam Herbsman, who runs Grand Central Consulting, a small political research outfit, noticed another change.

“Matching funds allow candidates to do their own polling and research, as opposed to relying on others,” he said. Often, parties have supplied those resources to state legislative candidates in the past.

### **A longer trend**

Growth in spending on consulting is part of a longer-term trend.

State campaign finance data shows spending on fees and retainers for consultants by New York legislative candidates has grown nearly threefold since 2000, even after adjusting for inflation, the Times Union found.

Underpinning that growth is the shift of campaigns to become more targeted and online, harnessing data and digital tools to reach voters and deploy messaging in ways that require specialists.

“The advent of digital campaigning has really opened up a lane of campaign spending that candidates need to be a part of,” Forand said. Now, consultants can target a digital ad on a streaming platform to reach one Assembly district, he said, increasing the value of that kind of service to state legislative races.

“There are not that many people that know how to do this,” said Post, of Progressive Elections. Candidates are turning to consultants because they’re experts in digital advertising, messaging and managing a campaign.



Legislative candidates in New York spent more money last year than in any election in the past 25 years, except one when accounting for inflation, and much of that money flowed to the legion of professionals who orchestrate campaigns behind the scenes.

Jim Franco/Times Union

Fees and retainers for consultants were slightly higher in 2022 than 2024, when adjusted for inflation, a fact some consultants attributed to [redistricting shuffling candidates](#) into new districts before the 2022 election. Payments to consultants stretch across multiple spending categories, including polling, advertising and fundraising, making it difficult to measure the full total collected by firms each year.

Political consulting firms have long been the largest businesses receiving campaign dollars spent by candidates, parties and political action committees in the state, campaign finance data shows.

At the top is the Parkside Group, a political consulting and lobbying shop that launched in 1999. The firm has collected more campaign funds from candidates, parties and PACs in state elections over the last 25 years than any other business, according to public records. Legislative candidates have used the Parkside Group more than any other firm in recent years.

The firm has also been the consultant to the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee for years.

When Parkside began, it was “rare” for consulting firms to be a “one-stop shop” where candidates can get strategy advice, polling, advertising, fundraising and other services, said Evan Stavisky, co-founder of the firm and son of state Sen. Toby Ann Stavisky and the late state Sen. Leonard Stavisky of Queens. But in recent years, that model has become more common.

Stavisky said he’s not sure the Public Campaign Finance Program had a major effect on the 2024 revenue of the firm, which also worked on congressional races. But, in general, it does offer new prospects for many political firms.

“If more people are running for office, and that is an express goal of the program, obviously it is going to create opportunities for people who are in the business of helping people run for office,” he said. “That’s just common sense.”



**Emilie Munson**

DATA REPORTER



Emilie Munson is a data reporter for the Times Union. She previously covered federal politics in Washington, D.C., for the Times Union and Hearst Connecticut Media. Emilie also has worked as a state capitol reporter for Hearst Connecticut Media and as an education reporter for the Greenwich Time. Her investigative reporting has won state and national awards.

**Link:**

<https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/dozens-ny-lawmakers-claimed-state-match-donations-20780118.php>



## **All in the family: Relatives helped NY candidates garner public funds**

A new program made it possible to get state money to boost candidates' contributions

By Emilie Munson, Staff writer

July 27, 2025



Ted Danz, founder of Family Danz Heating and Cooling, ran for state Senate in 2024 using the new Public Campaign Finance Program. His campaign claimed matching funds for contributions by himself and family members, like numerous other campaigns last year. (Albany County GOP)

ALBANY — When Ted Danz ran for state Senate last year, he wrote his campaign a check for \$250. His wife Diane gave \$250 to his campaign online. And 10 members of the Danz family living in the district also made contributions of \$250 or less.

Danz filed paperwork for New York to match those contributions through its new Public Campaign Finance Program. A state formula indicated these donations by Danz and his family would net his campaign about \$25,000 in taxpayer money.

He was not alone. The practice is allowed by state Election Law and many candidates capitalized on it.

Fifty-eight candidates for state Senate and Assembly made contributions to their own campaigns and then filed claims for matching state funds to amplify their platforms in 2024, the Times Union found. At least 113 candidates claimed matching funds for donations that they, their spouses or their family members made.

A Times Union analysis of the filings found that claims stemming from the candidates' own contributions would have paid over \$100,000 to their campaigns, according to a generous formula that gives candidates as much as \$12 in taxpayer funds to match every \$1 raised from small donors in their districts. (It is possible some claims were disallowed and not matched for unrelated reasons, like incomplete paperwork.)

In addition, claims from candidates' families would have paid at least \$200,000 to the campaigns. But that is a conservative estimate.

While campaigns label contributions that come from candidates, spouses or their families in their paperwork, the newspaper's analysis found many contributions were from family members but had not been labeled as such. Contributions by the candidate's parents, siblings, children, grandparents and spouse must be denoted by the campaign. State Election Law bars contributions from minors from receiving matching funds.

The New York Public Campaign Finance Program, used for the first time in New York during the 2024 elections, is intended to encourage candidates to gather small donations from everyday people in their districts and help those without deep pockets or influential friends to run for office.



Senators prepare to vote at the state Capitol on June 9. Many won election or reelection with campaigns fueled by the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program. Lori Van Buren/Times Union

But the taxpayer-funded system has its critics.

Assembly Minority Leader William Barclay said rules like matching funds for candidates' own contributions are exactly why many Republicans, like him, opposed implementation of the program.

“The deeper you look into the details of the public campaign finance system, the more outrageous they get,” he said. “Candidates can essentially give money to themselves and thousands of taxpayer dollars will magically appear in their campaign accounts. If you’re running for office, it’s free money. If you’re a New York taxpayer, it’s a little more of your paycheck you’ll never see.”

### **'Deeply disadvantaged'**

Keesha Gaskins-Nathan, a member of the Public Campaign Finance Board, said the board implements the program as the Legislature wrote it. Her opinion is that matching the contributions by candidates and their families particularly helps qualified candidates who are not well-connected or wealthy get started with their campaigns, in line with the program’s objectives.

“There is also a whole class of candidates who would be deeply disadvantaged by not allowing this,” she said.

Massachusetts, New York City, New Jersey and Rhode Island, all of which have similar public campaign finance programs, permit candidates to get taxpayer funds for money they

donate to themselves. Hawaii and Maryland make candidates' contributions to their own campaigns ineligible for the matching contributions.

In New York, candidates and their families who seek matching funds for their contributions must follow the rules that apply to all donors giving money to candidates participating in the program. Only contributions by residents of the district are matched. Before the threshold was raised in this year's budget, a donor could give no more than \$250 during the previous election cycles for matching funds to apply.

Danz, a Republican who ran for state Senate in the Albany area and founded a well-known HVAC company, said his children, grandchildren, spouse and two of his ex-wives donated to his campaign. He contends matching the contributions of candidates and their families is just another way that the program helps candidates compete without the backing of special interest groups.

"The people who are going to complain about this are the incumbents who have pockets full of money and all of a sudden they got a little more of a challenge this cycle from people who had to start from zero," he said. "It's very hard to raise money when you are not an incumbent to match the funds that are available and already in the pockets of incumbents."

Danz, who has also run for [Assembly and Congress](#), said the funds from the program helped him buy more advertising, mailers and to get his message out.

Republican candidate Daniel Ciciarelli, a town councilor near Syracuse, claimed nearly \$15,000 in state funds for donations by himself and six relatives.

"As a newcomer to a state level race going against a longtime incumbent, you are scrounging for every possible way to get an edge," he said. "A constituent is (a) constituent whether it is family or not. My family (members) are probably the most critical constituents I have ever had to deal with."

Other 2024 candidates who collected notable sums from contributions by themselves and family members include Democratic Assemblyman Nader J. Sayegh who claimed about \$14,000 or more in state funds due to gifts from at least nine relatives; Republican Assemblyman Patrick J. Chludzinski, who would have collected about \$11,000 in state funds thanks to donations from five relatives; Democratic candidate and Albany County Legislator Andrew Joyce claimed over \$7,000 from multiple contributions he made to himself and the donations from at least three relatives; and Democratic Assemblyman Edward Braunstein, who would have gathered at least \$6,500 in matching money from donations by himself, his spouse and at least one relative. Sayegh, Joyce and Braunstein could not be reached for comment.

Chludzinski said his family members were “hardworking, middle-class” and “of modest means,” and their support should be matched like any other donor.



Assemblyman Patrick J. Chludzinski, center, appeared in a budget hearing this year. His reelection campaign got donations from family members for matching funds through a state program. "I do not believe the fact they are related to me should diminish their voices or support," he said. Will Waldron/Times Union

Democratic Assemblyman Jordan Wright, son of the chairman of the Manhattan Democratic Party, claimed nearly \$7,000 from contributions by himself and family members. Reached by phone, he declined to comment and referred questions to his staff.

Cam MacDonald, litigation director at the Government Justice Center, the litigation arm of the fiscally conservative think-tank the Empire Center, called the rule permitting matching funds for candidates and family contributions “bad public policy.”

“This doesn’t look right that public campaign funds are matching money individual candidates are giving to their campaigns,” he said. “They shouldn’t be benefiting from additional money for their own giving. It’s only tempered by the fact that is only \$250 per cycle.”

Contributions by family should be handled the same way contributions by candidates because family members are more likely than others to act as straw donors on behalf of the

candidate, McDonald said. Straw donors are people who make contributions but are being reimbursed for their money by the candidate or someone else.

During the 2024 election cycle, a campaign could collect no more than \$250 from one person if it wanted to receive matching funds for the contribution.

In the 2026 cycle, that rule has changed thanks to [new language added](#) by Democrats to this year's state budget. A voter can now give up to \$1,050 and the first \$250 of the contribution is eligible for matching funds. The Public Campaign Finance Board has not issued regulations about whether the voter will now be able to collect a second match during the general election after previously making a \$250 contribution in the primary.

Tom Speaker, legislative director for Reinvent Albany, a group that backed the creation of the program, said his organization thinks the matched contributions for candidates and their family members do not undermine the program's goals. But the change in this year's budget could make the situation a bit "worse," he said, as candidates and their families are able to donate more and still claim matches.

"Candidates getting matching funds on their own donations is magnitudes better than getting five figures from the CEO of a large corporation," Speaker said. Family members of candidates should have as much voice in an election as anyone else, he added.

"If I was a candidate, would I be donating to myself? Would I be asking my family members to do that? Personally, no," Speaker said. "But it's not necessarily a negative."



The 2024 election cycle was the first in which the New York State Public Campaign Finance Program was used by candidates for the state Legislature. Next year, it will be used in the race for governor and other statewide offices. Will Waldron/Times Union

### **'Nothing to see here'**

Karen Wharton, democracy coalition coordinator for Citizen Action of New York, another group that advocated for the program, said the money spent by the state to match candidates' and their families' contributions is a small fraction of the \$34 million paid by the program in total and doesn't undermine its success.

"There is nothing to see here," she said. It was no secret the program would match those contributions, she said. She noted it could be viewed as discrimination not to treat the candidate's family members like other voters in the district whose contributions are eligible for matching funds.

Harvey Schantz, a professor of political science at SUNY Plattsburgh, said matching candidates' own contributions is an incentive for them to enter the program and give up the right to spend as much of their own money as they like on their campaigns. It also encourages them to make smaller donations to their campaigns to be able to claim matching funds.

Candidates in the program can give up to three times the individual contribution limit to their campaign. But in 2024, if they gave more than \$250, none of that money would receive matching funds. The individual contribution limit varies by office, but amounts to several thousand dollars.

Outside the program, candidates can give as much money to their campaigns as they want.

July 27, 2025



**Emilie Munson**

DATA REPORTER



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**Link:**

<https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/homeless-people-say-got-paid-donors-senate-20795982.php>



## **Homeless people said they were paid to be listed as donors for a Senate candidate**

By Emilie Munson, staff writer

August 15, 2025



Robert Schwartz, who is homeless, said he was paid by people associated with state Senate candidate Caleb Slater to fill out paperwork saying he made a political donation, although he never gave any money. "I go 'Somewhere down the line someone is going to be in trouble for this,'" he recalled. Jim Franco/Times Union

AUBURN — News of the easy money spread rapidly among the empty-pocketed men and women passing a hot day in the shade in Auburn's Market Street Park a year ago.

The opportunity emerged when a van pulled up at the downtown park in the small city in Cayuga County, about 30 miles west of Syracuse.

Robert Schwartz was broke and living at a men's shelter, so he climbed into the van. He said he was asked to write his name, address, phone number and email on a form stating he was making a \$250 political campaign donation. The 48-year-old didn't have \$250, but that didn't appear to matter to the man managing the paperwork.

Schwartz said he signed his name and was handed \$30 in cash. He was driven back to the park and a new group of three or four homeless people hopped in the vehicle for the same purpose.

State records show the campaign that collected Schwartz's purported donation belonged to Caleb Slater, a 28-year-old Republican who ran unsuccessfully for state Senate last year in the Syracuse region.

A Times Union investigation of the campaign's fundraising efforts has uncovered information that Slater reported contributions of \$250 from several homeless people who told the newspaper that they never donated money to his campaign and that they were paid to submit contribution forms for the campaign, according to interviews with seven donors and an examination of campaign finance records. One man said he was paid to recruit donors and front the contributions on their behalf. Two other donors said they contributed money to the campaign and were paid double for their donations by Slater himself.

Those purported contributions were then reported to the New York State Public Campaign Finance Board and netted more than \$20,000 in taxpayer money for Slater's campaign, which ended with his November loss to incumbent state Sen. Rachel May.

The records indicate Slater received more than \$235,000 from the taxpayer-funded program, a portion of which came from people who said they were paid, but much more that appears to stem from legitimate political contributions. Some of the donations are the subject of an ongoing investigation by the New York State Public Campaign Finance Board, according to a public official briefed on the matter but not authorized to comment publicly.



Caleb Slater, pictured here, ran unsuccessfully for state Senate in central New York in 2024. Multiple homeless people in Auburn, Cayuga County, said they were paid to be listed as donors on his campaign filings. (Source: Screen grab from web archive of Caleb Slater's campaign website)

Slater, in a text message, said the allegations leveled by the people who said they were paid for the use of their names as donors are “inaccurate.” He threatened to sue the Times Union for libel.

“Your facts are incorrect,” Slater wrote in the text. “At this time, I have nothing to say.”

Later, in response to written questions about the allegations, Slater said he was forwarding the Times Union’s inquiry to the Public Campaign Finance Board and that he would cooperate with the board’s requests. He added: “Within these questions are statements that I am learning of for the first time.”

The Public Campaign Finance Board administers the program and also has an enforcement arm to ensure the public funds are used in accordance with its regulation.

New York Election Law requires contributions to be made under the true name of the donor. The law also prohibits a candidate from knowingly accepting donations if the true source of the funds is disguised or to enter such contributions into their campaign records. The state forms signed by the homeless people interviewed for this story included a

disclaimer that states: “I certify that this contribution is being made from my own personal funds, is not being reimbursed in any manner, and is not being made as a loan to the committee.”

Joseph T. Burns, an attorney and partner at Holtzman Vogel who specializes in Election Law and previously worked at the New York State Board of Elections, said all donations must bear the name of the person who actually gave money to the campaign. Campaigns participating in the Public Campaign Finance program also must file paperwork attesting to the veracity of their contributions, he noted.

“It sounds like a run-of-mill straw donor scheme,” Burns said when informed of the allegations made by the purported donors. “Anybody that would be involved in orchestrating this could potentially face some sort of investigation or criminal charges.”

Last year was the first election cycle in which the state offered candidates generous amounts of campaign funds to match small donations collected in their districts through the Public Campaign Finance Program.



(Left) People gather in the shade in Auburn, New York up the street from the park where homeless people were allegedly recruited to sign paperwork stating they were making contributions to the Slater campaign. (Right) Elton Ellinger, wearing a white t-shirt, plays basketball in the park. He said he helped the campaign find people to fill out paperwork for contributions they never made. James Franco/Times Union

The program has spurred at least one documented instance of alleged fraud, according to prosecutors: In June, a Democratic state [Assembly candidate was arrested](#) after being accused of using fake donations and forged signatures to collect money from the state program. The candidate, Dao Yin, has been released on bond and is engaged in plea negotiations with prosecutors, court records show.

“The (Public Campaign Finance Board) has a number of audit and anti-fraud measures in place, and the PCFB enforcement unit is proud to work alongside law enforcement

agencies to ensure any alleged violations are treated seriously,” said Kathleen McGrath, the board’s spokeswoman.

The Public Campaign Finance Board declined to release copies of Slater’s contribution paperwork to the Times Union, citing a section of New York’s Freedom of Information Law that exempts the release of records if that disclosure would “interfere with law enforcement investigations or judicial proceedings.”

Regulations require the board also must keep all of its investigations confidential until a matter is dismissed or the board finds a violation has occurred, McGrath said, declining to confirm if there is an investigation of this matter.

### **Purchases at pharmacies, gas stations**

The Times Union interviewed six homeless people in Auburn who had each been listed in Slater’s campaign filings as having donated \$250 to the candidate last August. All of them said they made no donation, but were paid small amounts of cash to sign contribution forms. They said they knew nothing about Slater’s political activities or positions.

“At the time, it could have been Santa Claus running,” Schwartz told a Times Union reporter last week as he stood in the park just down the street from the spot where he said he and others were recruited. Schwartz used the \$30 in cash to buy food.

Elton Ellinger told the Times Union he had used his connections to recruit the homeless people to sign the contribution paperwork. Ellinger fronted the money for their donations and was paid by the campaign for his work with prepaid cash gift cards, he said.



Elton Ellinger, 35, claimed he was paid by Caleb Slater to find individuals who would sign paperwork stating they made political donations, but wouldn't actually give money to the campaign. Jim Franco/Times Union

In addition, two other Auburn residents — a married couple who are not homeless — said Slater personally solicited them for donations outside a Speedway gas station and offered to give them prepaid cash gift cards worth twice the value of their contributions. They accepted the offer. They requested not to be identified for this story to protect their privacy and employment.

“I said, 'Is this legal?'" the woman remembered. “He said, 'Yeah.'”

She also recalled Slater contacting his credit card company while he was with them and trying to purchase the gift cards. The couple said they supported the conservative Republican's political ideas and remember him actively campaigning in their town at events and with advertisements.

Records show that during three days in August 2024, Slater's campaign spent about \$17,000 at the local Walgreens, Kinney Drugs, Fastrac and Speedway — the same locations where Ellinger and the donors interviewed by the Times Union witnessed Slater and his helpers purchasing gift cards.

Slater's campaign records listed the purpose of those transactions as “fundraising.”



The Slater campaign spent over \$12,000 on items for "fundraising" at this Kinney Drugs (top left) on State Street in Auburn on Aug. 12 and 13, 2024, state data shows. The campaign also made numerous fundraising purchases at this Speedway (top right), Walgreens (bottom left) and Fastrac (bottom right) in Auburn on Aug. 9, 2024. James Franco/Times Union

Slater's campaign made those purchases last August, including on days when the homeless people were signing the contribution forms and the campaign recorded thousands of dollars in donations, state data shows. Thanks to the Public Campaign Finance Program, each \$250 contribution could generate up to \$2,300 from the state for Slater's campaign.

Two weeks after Slater recorded contributions from the Auburn donors, his campaign received more than \$100,000 in taxpayer money, state data shows.

### **'Cash for cash'**

Ellinger, a cook who said he sells synthetic cannabis on the streets of Auburn, said he first heard about Slater's offer of gift cards for contributions from a friend. The 35-year-old decided to check it out himself.

Ellinger said he met Slater on a street corner near a gas station in Auburn about a year ago. Slater allegedly asked Ellinger if he'd like to receive a \$25 gift card in exchange for a \$10 donation, Ellinger recalled. He readily agreed to the transaction, and he later decided

to replace his small donation with a \$250 one, in exchange for a larger gift card, he said. State records reflect a \$250 contribution from Ellinger was recorded by the campaign on Aug. 8, 2024.



Elton Ellinger said he was paid with prepaid cash gift cards to recruit donors for the Slater campaign and fund their contributions to the candidate. “We basically took every gift card out of the city that we could,” Ellinger said. Jim Franco/Times Union

Ellinger said he immediately recognized the situation as a business opportunity for himself and a rare windfall for his friends. Having been previously homeless, he said he knew some people who might be interested in a chance to make some cash fast. Ellinger offered to bring his friends and associates to Slater to sign up as donors in exchange for payment.

“It was cash for cash,” Ellinger said, noting that for each contribution he would allegedly receive double or triple that amount from Slater. Slater handed Ellinger each payment in gift cards, Ellinger said.

Bobbie Walborn, 59, was one of the people approached by Ellinger. She got in a van with other homeless individuals and was driven to a few locations around town as the driver hunted for gift cards, she said. She filled out paperwork with her name and phone number, stating that she was making a political contribution. Then, Walborn was given \$30 in cash for her participation before being dropped off downtown, she said.



Bobbie Walborn remembers being paid \$30 to fill out a form falsely stating that she made a contribution to a political campaign. She was homeless at the time. Slater's campaign later reported Walborn donated \$250. Jim Franco/Times Union

Her 39-year-old son, Michael Walborn, said he had a short interaction with Slater last year.

"I was kind of wary at first, but then he started explaining," Michael said. "I said, 'OK, I can think about it.'" Michael filled out the paperwork and took his pay.

Schwartz recalled many of the people returning to Market Street Park happy about the cash in their pockets after signing contribution paperwork.

"The whole downtown was lit," Schwartz said. "Everybody had money."

Schwartz's friend, a woman who asked not to be identified by name, remembered riding in the van that she said contained lawn signs for Slater's campaign when she went to make her purported contribution.

Both Schwartz and his friend also recalled being told that they might receive an important phone call at the number they listed on their paperwork. They were instructed to tell the caller that they had donated money to the Slater campaign, they said.

Around that time, the Public Campaign Finance Board had been calling donors across the state who contributed to the legislative campaigns that were participating in the program, according to multiple sources. Some of the outreach followed a [New York Times story](#) in June 2024 that revealed the allegations against Dao Yin, the Assembly candidate. He was [charged](#) by federal prosecutors in Brooklyn two months ago.



Michael Walborn is one of a number of people who said he was paid to fill out paperwork stating he was making a donation to Caleb Slater's campaign. Walborn never contributed any money to the campaign. Jim Franco/Times Union

### **'A great business opportunity'**

Ellinger said he brought Slater willing participants over the course of several days in August 2024.

It was a profitable enterprise: Ellinger covered the campaign contributions for the donors he delivered and paid them in cash for their participation. In exchange, Slater gave him numerous prepaid cash gift cards worth more than \$100 each, Ellinger said. Ellinger ended up with money left over that he could pocket.

Then, many of the donors used their newfound cash to buy Ellinger's cannabis, he said. Ellinger estimated that at one point he made about \$2,500 in total.

“It was a great business opportunity for everybody involved,” Ellinger said.



Elton Ellinger gives Roseann Titus a hug in Veteran’s Memorial Park in Auburn. When she was homeless, Titus was paid to complete paperwork falsely stating that she made a contribution to a political campaign, she said. The campaign of Caleb Slater later reported Titus donated \$250. Ellinger helped recruit people to fill out contribution paperwork for donations they never made, he said. Jim Franco/Times Union

But Slater soon ran out of money to spend on gift cards, Ellinger said. The candidate told Ellinger and his other helpers he'd be back soon with more.

However, campaign finance records do not show a similar pattern of additional contributions made to the campaign in Auburn around that time.

Slater, in a second email to the Times Union on Thursday afternoon, cast Ellinger as “a known felon providing false information.”

### **Real supporters donated**

Other contributors interviewed by the Times Union confirmed they had made their donations and supported Slater's campaign. Doreen Bosch of Syracuse donated \$10 to Slater's campaign in August because she believed he could help bring necessary change to New York, she said. Another local man, who asked not to be named, said he donated \$100 to Slater after hearing about his campaign from a county Republican Committee.

Before entering the Public Campaign Finance Program, Slater raised and spent about \$40,000 on his campaign from January 2023 to February 2024, state data shows. That money was not eligible for any state matching funds; Slater could only spend what people donated to him directly.

In early 2024, [another Republican](#) joined the same state Senate race and Slater entered the Public Campaign Finance Program, which is open to candidates in competitive elections. Slater, who was endorsed by local Conservative and Republican county committees, defeated his GOP opponent, Fanny Villarreal, in the June 2024 primary.

While participating in the Public Campaign Finance Program, Slater collected over \$50,000 in contributions and received nearly \$240,000 in state money for his campaign, state data shows.



Barbara Lifton is chairwoman of the New York State Public Campaign Finance Board, which oversees the program that paid the Slater campaign over \$200,000. Jim Franco/Times Union

In November, Slater received 42% of the vote, but ultimately lost the general election to May, a Democrat who has been in the state Senate since 2019 in a district that includes Syracuse and parts of Onondaga and Cayuga counties. Slater has not filed any paperwork to launch another campaign for state office.

Slater's LinkedIn account states he has been working since 2022 as a special projects coordinator for a large Houston apartment management company. He attended school in the Finger Lakes region and graduated from Ithaca College, where he was president of the college's Republican student group.

One Slater donor, a man who said he was given a gift card for his contribution and asked not to be named, commended Slater for spending time in Auburn listening to local workers. He remembered Slater taking notes during a conversation they had about local issues.

"He was in it to win it," the donor said.

Ellinger said he briefly talked politics with Slater after helping him with the donations. He disagreed with the candidate's political ideas and ultimately didn't think he should be elected.

“If I can manipulate that man to run a scam on his own campaign, that is not a guy you want as your senator,” he said. “You know what I mean?”

Aug 15, 2025



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DATA REPORTER



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**Link:**

<https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/probe-progresses-senate-candidate-allegedly-21236680.php>



## **Probe ongoing of Senate candidate accused of paying for donations**

By Emilie Munson, staff writer

December 15, 2025



Caleb Slater, pictured here, ran unsuccessfully for state Senate in central New York in 2024. Multiple homeless people in Auburn, Cayuga County, said they were paid to be listed as donors on his campaign filings. (Source: Screen grab from web archive of Caleb Slater's campaign website)

ALBANY — An investigation by the state attorney general's office is ongoing into the 2024 campaign of Republican state Senate candidate Caleb Slater, who allegedly paid donors for campaign contributions, including homeless people who never gave any money to the politician.

The attorney general's office confirmed Friday it is still probing the campaign of Slater, who was a first-time candidate in the Syracuse area, after the [Times Union revealed the questionable campaign's activities](#) in a story published in August. In October, investigators with the office questioned multiple people who were listed as donors about allegations that Slater used pre-paid cash gift cards to buy political donations, which he then submitted to a state election program to collect thousands of dollars in government matching funds.

The Times Union obtained a recording of the attorney general's investigators questioning one donor about Slater's actions, before asking the man to introduce them to other witnesses.

The state Public Campaign Finance Board is still auditing the campaigns of Slater and his opponent, state Sen. Rachel May, according to May. When the board conducts an audit, it examines all campaigns in a district. May is not facing allegations of wrongdoing. A spokeswoman for the board said she could not confirm which campaigns are being audited due to state regulations, but that audits of 2024 campaigns are "ongoing."

Slater did not respond to a request for comment. In August, he [claimed the allegations](#) were "incorrect." He claimed that he was learning of them for the first time and said he would cooperate with the Public Campaign Finance Board.

Last year, Slater won the Republican primary before losing in the general election to May, an incumbent, for a chance to represent Cayuga County and parts of Onondaga County in the state Senate. The 29-year-old Slater has not announced any plans to run for public office again.

"I don't think there is any interest in him being a candidate for anything ever," said Joe Bick, chair of the Onondaga County Republican Committee. "I take a dim view of public corruption like that."

Nate Vevone, who leads the Cayuga County Republican Committee, which backed Slater in the campaign, said "Everybody is entitled to due process and I hope that the allegations are not true, but if they are, that is not acceptable."

State Election Law requires contributions to be made under the true name of the donor. The law also prohibits a candidate from knowingly accepting donations if the true source of the funds is disguised or to enter such contributions into their campaign records.

The Times Union found that in August 2024 Slater and his campaign staff solicited political contributions in exchange for pre-paid cash gift cards outside gas stations and pharmacies in Auburn, a small city in Cayuga County southwest of Syracuse.



The Fastrac Cafe on Grant Avenue in Auburn, Cayuga County. Jim Franco/Times Union

Two Auburn residents said Slater personally asked them for donations and offered to give them prepaid cash gift cards worth twice the value of their contributions. They accepted the offer. They requested not to be identified for this story to protect their privacy and employment.

Klaas Van Der Werf worked at a Fastrac gas station where the Slater campaign bought — and then tried to sell — pre-paid gift cards last August.

“I do remember a guy who was standing outside my store and he was offering people \$25 gift cards for a \$10 donation toward the campaign,” the employee said in a recent interview. “He also was offering higher gift cards for higher donations. ... My store does have a daily limit of selling gift cards so we had to cut him off at like \$1,250.”

Elton Ellinger made a donation in exchange for a gift card, he said. Then, the local drug dealer spotted an opportunity. He and a friend enlisted homeless people from the local park and drove them to meet Slater and his staff, he said. Each homeless person signed campaign paperwork falsely attesting that they were making a \$250 donation to Slater's campaign.

However, Slater's campaign took payments from Ellinger's friend for the homeless people's donations and then paid Ellinger and his friend with pre-paid cash gift cards for their efforts. The homeless individuals were paid with small amounts of cash, and some used the money to buy drugs from Ellinger.



Elton Ellinger in Veteran's Memorial Park in Auburn, Cayuga County. Jim Franco/Times Union

The Times Union interviewed six homeless people in Auburn who had each been listed in Slater's campaign filings as having donated \$250 to the candidate last August. All of them said they made no donation, but were paid about \$30 in cash to sign contribution forms. They said they knew nothing about Slater's political activities or positions.

Records show that during three days that month, Slater's campaign spent about \$17,000 at the local Walgreens, Kinney Drugs, Fastrac and Speedway — the same locations where Ellinger and the donors interviewed by the Times Union said they witnessed Slater and his

helpers purchasing gift cards. Slater's campaign records listed the purpose of those transactions as "fundraising."

Thanks to the state's new Public Campaign Finance Program, each \$250 contribution could generate up to \$2,300 from the state in matching funds for Slater's campaign. Two weeks after Slater recorded contributions from the Auburn donors, his campaign received more than \$100,000 in taxpayer money, state data shows.

Other donors to Slater's campaign who were contacted by the Times Union confirmed they made donations to the candidate with their own money and received no reimbursement.

When investigators from the attorney general's office went to Auburn two months ago to question donors, they told Ellinger he was "not a suspect" and that he was "on the right side of this," according to a recording of the interview shared with the Times Union. The investigators had Ellinger describe in detail how Slater and his campaign paid for donations with gift cards and asked him for one of the gift cards as evidence. Then, they requested Ellinger introduce them to the homeless people who had signed contribution forms.

At one point during the conversation, an investigator implied he believed other politicians used Slater's methods too.

"You know that other politicians are worried about (this) sh-- because I am sure they all do it," he said.

Bobbie Walborn said she was also questioned by the attorney general's investigators in Auburn. She was homeless last August and was among those who were paid to sign a donation form.

"People got scammed and I don't think it's right," she said.



Bobbie Walborn in Veteran's Memorial Park on Aug. 5 along Genesee Street in Auburn, Cayuga County. Jim Franco/Times Union

Records show Slater received \$240,000 from the state's Public Campaign Finance Program to spend on his campaign. He raised about \$51,000 in contributions.

Slater spent three times more money on campaign consultants than anything else he bought with his political funds, including television ads and mailings, according to public records.

His campaign's greatest expense was \$146,000 paid to Avalanche Political Consulting, a business that was formed in Texas in July 2024 — the month before Slater made his first payment to the firm — according to public records in Texas and New York. The company is managed by a trio of young men, at least two of whom previously worked in the Texas Legislature. At least two of the managers also used to work at a Texas business where Slater was previously employed, according to their LinkedIn profiles.

Morgan Neptune's LinkedIn previously referred to him as the managing partner of Avalanche Political Consulting, although he has since removed reference to the business from the online page. A source familiar with Slater's campaign said Neptune helped run the

campaign. Reached in August, Neptune declined to answer questions about his business or the campaign. He did not respond to a call this week.

Campaign finance filings also show Slater spent \$4,200 in campaign funds at Carhartt, Macy's, Men's Warehouse and Old Navy. His campaign labeled the expenses as "television ads" in state filings.

Slater was one of over 300 candidates who participated in the state Public Campaign Finance Program in 2024. The program paid eligible state candidates money to match small donations they collected from people in their district. Some small donations were eligible for up to a 12:1 match. Last year was the first time the program was used.

In June, a Democrat running for state Assembly in New York City was [arrested and charged](#) with wire fraud for allegedly defrauding the program by reporting fake campaign contributions with forged signatures to secure over \$160,000 in matching funds from the program. Court records indicate the former candidate, Dao Yin, may be engaged in plea negotiations with federal prosecutors in Manhattan.

This spring, lawmakers and the governor approved changes to the [Public Campaign Finance Program](#) that could help candidates collect more taxpayer money for their campaigns while also leaning on bigger donors. Kathleen McGrath, a spokeswoman for the state Board of Elections, said the board has made substantial changes to training for candidates and their treasurers for those participating in the program in 2026, when it will be used by candidates seeking statewide office for the first time.

"The PCFB remains committed to administering a program of public matching funds to state level candidates in a meticulous, efficient, and transparent way," McGrath said.

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DATA REPORTER



Emilie Munson is a data reporter for the Times Union. She previously covered federal politics in Washington, D.C., for the Times Union and Hearst Connecticut Media. Emilie also has worked as a state capitol reporter for Hearst Connecticut Media and as an education reporter for the Greenwich Time. Her investigative reporting has won state and national awards.