



February 16, 2023

Testimony from Jonah Minkoff-Zern, Co-Director, Public Citizen's Democracy Campaign

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Minnesota establishing a more robust public finance program to ensure that the voices of every day Minnesotans have their voices heard. Public Citizen, with more than 13,000 members and supporters in Minnesota .

Citizens United, as well as other related court rulings, have resulted in a campaign funding system that benefits large contributions, corporations, and affluent special interests. Public finance is one of the most effective instruments in the armory for restoring power to voters and candidates. In the 1980s and 1990s, Minnesota pioneered innovative public funding mechanisms, but the present model is unsustainable and has not kept pace with campaign costs.

Small donor matching is an efficient approach for lawmakers to respond to *Citizens United* and related rulings, allowing them to spend less time dialing for funds and more time communicating with voters.

What is the program's significance? Public funding from small contributions would allow candidates to listen to their constituents instead of big funders. It encourages politicians to seek out numerous non-wealthy supporters who are more reflective of our districts when fundraising, rather than just a few huge contributions. It would broaden the pool of contributors, officeholders, and candidates while also amplifying regular people's views.

According to a Brennan Center analysis, politicians who have chosen to participate in public financing systems have regularly outraised and outspent those who rely on affluent private contributors, resulting in elected officials who are accountable to their constituents and every day Americans, rather than a small pool of wealthy donors..

In a post-election study performed in 2022, We Choose Us discovered that 79% of respondents feel that restricting the amount of money an entity may give to a political campaign and spend on elections is an essential step toward strengthening democracy. Instead, campaigns should be

funded and candidates should spend their time talking to every day Minnesotans. This will create better policy and a stronger democracy where voters feel empowered to speak out and share ideas for the state.

With [public trust in government near historic lows](#), and with recent Pew Research polls showing that [Americans view reducing the influence of money in politics as a top 5 priority](#), this moment represents an extraordinary opportunity for Minnesota to set an example nationwide. The potential benefits of this program cannot be overstated.

Fully funded small donor public financing programs are proven to be effective mechanisms for candidates and more inclusive for voters of all backgrounds. According to the Brennan Center, candidates throughout the country who have opted in to public financing programs have consistently managed to outraise and outspend candidates reliant on private wealthy donors, thus [enjoying more electoral success](#). New York's Attorney General Letitia James, who opted into the program before taking state office, said that she would not have been able to get to her current position without public financing.

The ability of public financing programs to make our democracy more inclusive for everyone is clear. From Berkeley, California to Washington, DC, these programs saw increased donor participation beyond just white wealthy zip codes, with more engagement from new donors, donors in zip codes with lower median incomes, and young people, people of color, and working people.

These programs not only lower the barrier to entry for voters, but also for candidates who are women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and working class.

This dynamic is supported by [data from New York City](#), where recent elections saw women increase their representation on the city council from 27 percent to 61 percent, people of color, making up 68 percent of city residents, increase their representation from 51 percent to 67 percent, and women of color more than double their seats.

All the while, women and people of color who won seats or were competitive raised as much on average as their white male counterparts and relied on small donations and public matching funds to similar degrees.

With more voters and candidates from diverse backgrounds being involved in the electoral process, Minnesota stands to benefit through a stronger democracy and, with more input from underrepresented communities, improved policy that better addresses constituents' needs.

Minnesota was once a contemporary campaign finance leader, and you now have the potential to do so again. A robust system of public financing that allows politicians to break through the noise of major outside expenditures and engage directly with their voters, encourages average Minnesotans to give to the candidates they support, and strengthens responsible ties between candidates and voters. Now is the time to act.