



Testimony to the City Council Governmental Operations Committee

Implementing Voter-Approved Campaign Finance Measures for Special Elections Beginning in 2019

December 12, 2019

Good morning Chair Cabrera. My name is Alex Camarda, and I am the Senior Policy Advisor for Reinvent Albany. Reinvent Albany is a government watchdog organization which advocates for open and accountable government.

The bill before the Council today will enable candidates running for special elections beginning in 2019 to voluntarily opt into the new campaign finance requirements approved by voters on Election Day in 2018 and placed on the ballot by the 2018 Charter Revision Commission convened by Mayor de Blasio.

The new campaign finance requirements will lower campaign contribution limits to \$2,000 for candidates opting into the city's public matching program (and \$3,500 for non-participants), match donations \$8 to \$1 for the first \$175 of any contribution, and enable candidates to raise 75 percent of their campaign money from public funds. Contributions are halved for special elections.

Reinvent Albany is a strong supporter of these voter-approved campaign finance reforms, believing they will amplify the voice of small donors and ensure all New Yorkers can participate in our democracy. [We testified six times before the 2018 Charter Revision Commission, including as invited experts on campaign finance reform, and worked with Councilmember Ben Kallos to get a majority of Councilmembers to support his legislation to increase the public match cap in 2017 and 2018.](#)

We emphatically supported these reforms overall because they were substantial improvements. However, we opposed the new campaign contribution limits, public match rate, and public match cap being phased in, instead of taking effect immediately.

Reinvent Albany supports this bill because it puts in place the reforms for special elections between 2019 and through 2021. The benefits of implementing these reforms immediately for special elections outweighs our one reservation, which is changing the rules of the game midcourse for the upcoming public advocate special election. However, most candidates in the special election for Public Advocate have raised little money and would therefore likely opt into and benefit from the public matching system. In the last race for an open seat for Public Advocate, Tish James, Dan Squadron, and Reshma Saujani all raised more in public than private funds. This demonstrates the need for the voter-approved campaign finance measures so special election candidates can rely more heavily on public funds for their campaigns.

Reinvent Albany believes this bill could be strengthened by also immediately putting into effect the lower contribution limits passed by the voters for candidates who do not participate in the public matching system and run for office in a special election. For Public Advocate, non-participants will be able to raise \$2,550 per donor rather than the new, lower contribution limit of \$1,750 passed by the voters in November but not going into effect until 2022. Maintaining the current contribution limit of \$2,550 will discourage candidates from participating in the public matching system.

We also believe the Council should repeal the option allowing candidates to remain in the old system in the 2021 primary and general elections. The voters have made clear they want a reduction in contribution limits, and a higher public match rate and cap. This should be put into effect immediately.

Reinvent Albany also notes this bill halves the contributions and money raised thresholds to qualify for the public funds program for citywide office. It also lowers the amount candidates have to spend to qualify for the first debate sponsored by the New York City Campaign Finance Board. Both of these amendments we also support.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I welcome any questions you may have.