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To combat dark money, New York needs fair elections

Limit influence of big money by reducing contribution limits and match small contributions.

By JULIA SALAZAR (/author/julia-salazar) | FEBRUARY 12, 2019

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Grassroots movements all across the country have taken center stage in how we’re organizing and building power in our communities. Last year, upsets in U.S. House of Representatives elections like the successful campaign of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez proved that Democratic voters are tired of politicians who cater to big money. In both parties, but especially the Republican Party, a dependence on large donations from wealthy donors, corporations and their political action committees has skewed our democracy against the needs and rights of working-class people, people of color and immigrants.

To represent progressive values, being a Democrat is no longer enough: There needs to be a genuine commitment to fighting for the people, and the only way to ensure that is if politicians are no longer beholden to corporations.

In order to tackle the long list of priorities for our communities in Albany – including putting public schools first, passing universal rent control, aggressively championing workers’ rights and restoring access to driver’s licenses for all – we have to get big money out of politics. The two key elements of this reform would be significantly reducing contribution limits and implementing a small-dollar matching program so that candidates prioritize working-class people’s contributions.

Nov. 6, 2018, changed the political landscape in New York and shifted it to finally being a triple-blue state. Voter turnout surged (<http://www.gothamgazette.com/state/8056-voter-turnout-booms-in-new-york>). The power of grassroots organizations combined with true progressive candidates enabled Democrats to finally take back the majority in the state Senate. The former members of the Independent Democratic Conference, a breakaway group of Democrats who empowered Republicans in the state Senate and gave them the majority, were almost all defeated by a group of progressive candidates who shook up the political scene by running winning campaigns that centered on not taking (<https://readsludge.com/2018/07/31/breakaway-n-y-dems-rake-in-big-corporate-donations-as-challengers-log-many-small-contributions/>) corporate money.

In my district in Brooklyn, our campaign was able to take down big money and defeat an incumbent – but it wasn't easy. We were running a people-powered campaign that challenged the status quo. And when we showed that we could do effective grassroots fundraising, corporate interests got scared. New Yorkers for Putting Students First, the political action committee of the pro-charter group StudentsFirstNY, gave (<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-metro-charter-group-gives-to-pols-20180911-story.html>) \$18,000 to try to defeat me. Why? Because, while I wanted to focus our state's education priorities on fully funding our public schools, which are owed \$4.1 billion as a result of the landmark Campaign For Fiscal Equity lawsuit (according to data provided by the New York State Department of Education's Fiscal Analysis Unit), my opponent would happily boost their charter school agenda. Meanwhile, we know from data gathered by the Alliance for Quality Education that schools in our district are owed \$58 million of this money!

For too long in Albany, ultra-wealthy hedge fund and real estate titans have spent lavishly on our state politics to put the desires of charter schools that they bankroll above the needs of public schools, and to block our community's attempts to address the affordable housing crisis. Unfortunately, that's led to too many legislators who prioritized the desires of millionaires over the needs of children and tenants. In education, disadvantaged schools should have been fully funded in compliance with the CFE lawsuit years ago, but the voices of parents and students fighting for these dollars have all too often been drowned out by those of hedge fund charter-backers demanding that legislators prioritize charter schools' wish list above public school needs. These wealthy donors also reject raising taxes on the wealthy to provide the added revenue that would make fully resourcing our public schools easier.

It's a new day in Albany, and we're no longer going to cater to the wealthy few. We know that our districts are home to working-class people of color and immigrants who are counting on their legislators to fight for them in Albany. Just take Consuelo de Leon, an immigrant mother with three public school children who has seen schools in her district shortchanged time and time again. Consuelo has worked with fellow parent leaders at the community organization Make the Road New York to fight for public school funding, but has repeatedly seen how the voices of super-wealthy opponents of public education get more attention than her.

At a recent press conference in Albany, I heard Consuelo and her fellow parents calling to get big money out of politics and level the playing field. Because we want voices like Consuelo's to be heard, we need comprehensive campaign finance reform, with a public financing system. As a Brennan Center analysis (<https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/public-financing-elevate-diverse-voices>) of New York City's public-financing system showed, these reforms produce more diverse donors (especially among low-income people and people of color) and more diverse elected officials, who better reflect the diversity of our communities.

By reforming our campaign finance system, and introducing a small-dollar matching system, we will usher in a new era when working-class people have a more equal chance of being heard. These much needed reforms will finally let New York become the progressive beacon it needs to be.



Julia Salazar is the senator from New York's 18th state Senate District in Brooklyn.

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