

# Campaign finance reform benefits women

Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Letitia James

March 23, 2014



(Photo: Albert Conte / The Journal News)

## Story Highlights

- New York's plan creates a system where public funds match citizens' small campaign contributions to reduce the influence of big money in politics.
- Despite the fact that women represent a majority of the state's population, they only make up 21.2 percent of its state Legislature, significantly below the national average.
- The alarming lack of women lawmakers and leaders has resulted in Legislatures that too often stand in the way of real reform.

New York state is on the cusp of making history — and that's a good thing for women.

Earlier this year, Gov. Andrew Cuomo included a proposal for the public financing of state elections in his budget. The plan creates a system where public funds match citizens' small campaign contributions to reduce the influence of big money in politics.

Supporters of publicly financed elections have expressed many of the potential benefits of this measure, such as reduced public corruption, a more efficient and functional Legislature, and so on. But one clear, concrete and often overlooked benefit to comprehensive campaign finance reform is the likelihood that more women will be elected to office.

The national average percentage of elected women lawmakers in state legislative bodies is 24.2 percent. Currently, there are five states with public financing for legislative elections, and all of them are currently above the national average: Arizona (35.6 percent), Connecticut (29.4 percent), Hawaii (31.6 percent), Maine (29.8 percent) and Minnesota (33.8 percent).

Female representation in the New York State Legislature is at 25 percent in the Assembly and a shamefully low 18 percent in the Senate. Without the benefit of public financing of campaigns, New York is currently ranked 32nd in the nation.

Despite the fact that women represent a majority of the state's population, they only make up 21.2 percent of its state Legislature, significantly below the national average.

As women who have had the honor of being elected to office, we know that regardless of party affiliation, a more representative government leads to better outcomes.

The first governor elected with a full public financing system was a woman: Janet Napolitano of Arizona. And New York City's robust system of public financing recently helped elect two women of color as top citywide leaders. In short, the historical experience shows that publicly financed elections means more women in elected office.

Why should that matter?

It is critical to have more women in elected office for many reasons. First of all, our democracy will be stronger if our elected leaders are more representative of the population they serve. Second, more girls and women will be inspired to choose public service as a realistic career choice if they see more women in office. Third, we know that when women are elected to office they fight for and win passage of issues that deeply affect women and their families.

The alarming lack of women lawmakers and leaders has resulted in Legislatures that too often stand in the way of real reform. We have it within our power to remedy this by electing more women, but to do so we must first change the way elections are financed. As the Center for Women in Politics reminds us, "Beyond achieving fundamental fairness and democratic ideals, having women in office makes a difference."

As we continue our own work to empower women, move women's issues to the forefront of public debate and encourage our daughters to be anything they want to be, we urge the New York state government to act.

Gov. Cuomo has proposed a strong measure that has the potential to make history — and he has even sponsored campaign ads to support it. Now that there is a growing coalition, and a majority of Assembly and Senate leaders, there are no excuses left for inaction.

Implementing a voluntary public campaign financing system for all legislative and statewide races in New York into law is within our reach. The governor and the Legislature must move this proposal past the finish line.

New York deserve nothing less.

*State Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers, leads the New York Democratic Conference; New York City Public Advocate Letitia James serves in the position as ombudsman or "watchdog" for New York City residents.*