Campaign Finance Reform
The Public Campaign Financing Commission created after a stalemate in the state legislature last session released their proposal on November 25 to implement public campaign financing in New York State. The proposal will become law unless the legislature returns by December 22 to modify all or part of it. Their full proposal can be found on their website https://campaignfinancereform.ny.gov/. ReInvent Albany has created a summary of the recommendations which can be found on their site https://reinventalbany.org/ or directly here.

The League testified at the hearing in New York City in December and in October and November the League worked with local Leagues in Long Island and Buffalo to empower League members to testify at the final two public hearings in those areas. The League worked with the Fair Elections NY coalition to track the process of the commission and participate in a joint letter to commissioners urging them to release their recommendations early so that the public could add their input.

The League released a statement criticizing the commission for becoming distracted by peripheral issues, not reducing contribution limits sufficiently and proposing a system that could work out to favor incumbent candidates. In addition to the proposal for a public campaign financing system, the Commission significantly raised the threshold of votes for a party to gain a ballot line and required the threshold to be met every two years. They also raised the number of petition signatures required for a statewide candidate to get on the ballot. Following the release of the package the League issued the following statement:

“The League continues to believe that comprehensive campaign finance reform is the change New York’s state government desperately needs above all. This Commission had before it a historic opportunity to make significant improvements to our broken campaign finance system, centered around a small donor matching system that would actually work. Instead, they are leaving the job half-done and have allowed themselves to be distracted with issues that are tangential to their mission. The complex small donor matching system proposed by this commission in some ways may be seen to be designed to favor incumbents. The League believes that much lower campaign contribution limits for all candidates and parties and better enforcement are necessary for any new public financing system to function as intended and fix how elections work in this state.”

Contribution limits are reduced from the current sky-high limits but are still far too high. Most disappointingly, the proposal does not address party committee contribution limits ($117,300 from an individual or union) or contain any restrictions on contributions from individuals or unions doing business with the state. Contributions to parties can be passed along to candidates circumventing the lowering of individual contribution limits.

Changes to the public financing system could also be done at any point before the new system becomes effective. The public funding portion of the proposal is not slated to be effective until the 2024 election for legislative races and the 2026 election for statewide races. It is likely that there will also be legal challenges to any and all of the proposal. There has already been a lawsuit filed against the new threshold of votes to gain a party ballot line.