



Wednesday, March 16, 2022

## Candidate Questionnaire - 2022 Primary

Dear Kellie Claire Leeson,  
Congratulations on your decision to run for a seat on the New York Legislature!  
Citizens Union appreciates your commitment to serve the public.  
In the following pages, you will find questions regarding your positions on various reform issues and your plans for office.  
Responses to these questions will be one of several factors Citizens Union uses to evaluate candidates running for office, and to issue our preference for the June primary. Read more about the method, principles, and criteria of the candidate evaluation process [here](#).

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**If you wish to be considered, please submit the questionnaire by March 16.**

If you seek our support, we will need to schedule an interview with you as part of the evaluation process. Given time constraints and the limited capacity of a member-based organization, we may not be able to evaluate all contests or candidates in this election cycle.

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If you cannot complete the questionnaire in one sitting, you can click Save at the bottom of every page.

Once you submit the questionnaire, you will receive a confirmation email with your responses. Citizens Union will not be able to see your answers unless you submit the form. We plan to make responses to this questionnaire public on our website, printed voters directory, and other appropriate venues (your contact information will not be published).

For any questions, please email [candidates@citizensunion.org](mailto:candidates@citizensunion.org)

We thank you very much for your response.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### Name

Kellie Claire Leeson

### Office Sought (New York State)

Assembly

### District Number

73

### In which primary

Democratic

### What party line/s are you running under?

Democrat and Working Families Party

### If elected, which legislative conference will you join (e.g., Democrat, Republican, other)?

Democrat and Working Families Party

### Age

48

### Education

Bachelor of Arts (UNC/Chapel Hill) and Masters of Arts (Teachers College/Columbia University)

### Previous Offices, Campaigns and Community/Civic Involvement

#### Civic Involvement:

Empire State Indivisible Steering Committee

Invest in Our New York Coalition Leader

True Blue Coalition Member

POST Act Working Group

Lower East Side Girls Club Mentor

Active Campaign Volunteer Support (among others):

Hillary Clinton in 2016 General  
NoIDC slate (primarily Biaggi and Myrie) 2018  
Samra Brouk and Rachel May 2020  
Elizabeth Warren in NH 2020 Primary

**Website**            [kellieforassembly.com](http://kellieforassembly.com)

**Twitter**            [kellieforny](https://twitter.com/kellieforny)

**Facebook**        [kellie for assembly](https://www.facebook.com/kellieforassembly)

## AFFIRMATIONS

**Have you completed the required campaign finance filings?**

Yes

**Are you willing to be interviewed by Citizens Union's Local Candidates Committee?**

Yes

(Please note: interviews are prerequisites for Citizens Union preferences and endorsements)

**Signature**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kellie Johnson". The signature is stylized and cursive.

# ETHICS

**Do you support replacing Joint Commission on Public Ethics with an effective and independent enforcement body, whose members are not appointed directly by elected officials?**

Yes

**Do you support the new independent ethics oversight agency to also replace the Legislative Ethics Commission (LEC)?**

Yes

**Do you support allowing the new ethics body to investigate misconduct more effectively by simplifying its voting rules, giving it the authority to subpoena testimony and documents, empowering it to suspend or terminate public officials (not elected officials), and increasing its transparency?**

Yes

**Do you support significantly limiting outside compensation earned by state legislators and eliminate stipends, while increasing their pay?**

Yes

**Do you hold financial interest or serve as an officer on an entity that receives funding from the state? If you do, how will you manage this conflict of interest?**

No

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

No

# ELECTIONS AND VOTING

## Election Administration

**How would you use your power as a legislator to improve election administration in New York? Feel free to add any policy proposals you support in regards to reforming the BOE.**

The New York State Legislature should pass Senate S6226A/A5691B, which clarifies the roles and responsibilities of commissioners and the co-executive directors of the NYC Board of Elections. I would also work to get Senator Myrie's suite of election law bills pass in the Assembly which includes creating conflict-of-interest standards for commissioners and sets minimum staffing levels for Boards of Election. We should also enact automatic voter registration, and allow folks who show up at the wrong polling location to still vote at that location.

**Do you support removing the constitutional requirement in election administration that empowers the two major political parties to nominate and effectively control election boards?**

Yes

**Do you support reducing the party-based hiring in boards of elections to the minimum currently required by the constitution?**

Yes

**Do you support implementing an open, competitive, merit-based hiring process for all election administration staff and certain functions at polls?**

Yes

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions.

## Voting Rights

**Do you support re-passing the constitutional amendment to enact same-day voter registration, and putting it on the ballot in 2024?**

Yes

**Do you support re-passing the constitutional amendment to enact no-excuse absentee voting, and putting it on the ballot in 2024?**

Yes

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

## Open and Competitive Elections

**Do you support easing access to the ballot for parties and independent candidates, by returning to the pre-2020 voting and signature thresholds? That includes reducing the voting threshold to become a registered party back to 50,000 votes in a gubernatorial election, and the petition requirement for independent candidates back to 15,000 signatures.**

Yes

**Do you support reforming the process of filling vacancies in the state legislature by implementing nonpartisan special elections or holding a primary election at least thirty days in advance of the special election?**

Yes

**Who do you think should draw new district maps every decade in New York?  
(e.g., the current Independent Redistricting Commission, the Legislature/LATFOR,  
a new body)**

We need a truly independent redistricting commissioner; one that is not bipartisan,  
but instead is nonpartisan.

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions.  
You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or  
plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

# CAMPAIGN FINANCE

**Do you support further reducing campaign contribution limits?**

Yes

**Do you support setting even lower contribution limits for registered lobbyists and those who do business with the state?**

Yes

**Starting from the next election cycle, New York will have a public campaign finance program, offering matching funds on small donations for candidates who opt in. If you decide to run again in the next election, do you intend to participate in the program?**

Yes

**Do you support moving the campaign finance matching program to be administered by an independent, nonpartisan body outside of the State Board of Election?**

Yes

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

[Elected or not, I would want to work with organizations such as Citizens Union to review the public campaign finance program, and ensure it's as strong as it can be.](#)



# COURT REFORM

**Do you support simplifying and consolidating New York State's court system - which includes 11 trial courts - by passing the Chief Judge's proposed constitutional amendment to modernize the courts?**

Yes

If needed, you may elaborate below on your positions on the previous questions. You may also provide additional information on any actions that you have taken or plan to take to advance your positions on these issues.

# GOALS, PLANS, AND REPRESENTATION

**What are the top three campaign promises or goals, and what action will you take to achieve them if elected? Feel free to reference an answer above rather than restate it.**

First: Putting Families First: universal childcare, ensuring our public schools are fully funded

Second: Accountable Governance: more transparency and balance to our budget process, public participation in committee meetings, restoring the comptroller's oversight of contracts

Third: Climate Action: committing \$15 billion to climate justice

**If elected, what is the first piece of legislation you would want to introduce? If you are an incumbent, what is the first piece of legislation you would want to pass?**

I would introduce a bill that would create a year-round legislative session, as opposed to the 6 months legislators are currently in Albany.

**In providing constituent service, what are the major needs of your district's constituents and how will you meet them?**

One of the biggest concerns of District 73 constituents is the hollowing out of small businesses from COVID-19, which has impacted both individuals and communities. This is clearly evidenced by empty storefronts throughout the district. I would support incoming small business owners in navigating red tape and bureaucracy.

District 73 is an older demographic, and many of its residents are concerned about their ability to age in place. A component of this is ensuring adequate infrastructure, such as elevators and escalators, to support mobility needs.

**What experience have you had, if any, with good government and reform issues? (e.g. voting and elections, campaign finance, ethics, government transparency and oversight, police accountability). If you've worked to advance these goals, we'd love to hear about it.**

As a co-lead of Empire State Indivisible, I've helped educate others about and advocated directly to elected officials on, extensive voting reforms through the Fair Elections Coalition. I also helped organize people to testify on the then-

proposed Public Campaign Finance program.

**How long have you lived in the district in which you are running?**

I've lived in NYC for almost a decade, specifically on the east side in Manhattan.

**Have you lived in the district before this year's redistricting?**

No

**For incumbents: If your district has changed significantly following this year's redistricting, how do you intend to run your office to serve the needs of the new constituents you now represent?**

# PATH TO VICTORY

**What is your win number (the number of votes needed to win this race), and what is your plan to achieve that number?**

Because this is a deep-blue district, our team will be laser-focused on winning the June 2022 primary. The current district includes 61,032 registered Democrats. Past voting trends indicate that 25% of registered voters will show up in the 2022 primary, totaling 15,258. Knowing that there may be a slight uptick due to the gubernatorial election, and there are five candidates total, my win number is 7,400. I am focused on cultivating support from key stakeholders in the community, with an eye towards inclusion, transparency and trust-building.

I am the only candidate who has worked around the world to better people's lives AND has translated that work here on the ground in New York for years to do the same. Unlike my competitors, my decade of domestic organizing experience has been focused on change in Albany, not just New York City, giving me the requisite network, experience, and understanding of the issues to be able to hit the ground running. I am also the only candidate that has worked to ensure the RHA was passed at the state level by defeating the IDC.

The breadth of my worldview has shown me that our "uniquely" New York problems are not so unique – a perspective that gives me the insight and experience to help address the complex issues facing us right now, such as COVID recovery, climate change, and crumbling infrastructure. We need to apply better, smarter, more forward-thinking approaches – wherever we can find them – to our problems here.

**What are your current fundraising numbers, if different than the last campaign finance filing?**

over \$60,000

**How many individual donors do you have?**

175

**Please indicate any endorsements that your campaign has received, if applicable (you can also share a link to a list of endorsements)**

The Working Families Party; Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club, State Senator Alessandra Biaggi and Empire State Indivisible

## ADDITIONAL INFO

Please feel free to attach any additional information such as resume, campaign brochures, or issues statements.

### What else would you like us to know about yourself?

I helped co-found Empire State Indivisible (ESI) based on a recognition that the status quo was immoral and leaving too many behind. ESI is based on the belief that we need to transform city, state and national politics to build a more compassionate and more equitable New York. ESI works in collaboration with partners throughout the state to strengthen our democracy, advocate for a more just state budget, and support progressive democrats. In 2018, ESI worked in collaboration with coalition partners to take down the fake Democrats in the N.Y. State Senate, known as the "Independent Democratic Conference," and since then has worked to rebuild a more accountable state government.

My life's work has centered around improving people's lives, and I pledge to do the same for the people of District 73. In senior leadership roles with the International Rescue Committee and NYU's Development Research Institute I gained a global perspective that informs my approach to local public office. In 2017, I co-founded the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, hosted by the Women's Refugee Commission and RefugePoint, an industry-leading collaboration that promotes opportunities for refugees to get back on their feet and achieve a better quality of life while simultaneously advocating for the full enjoyment of their rights. I currently serves as US Board Chair of Urban Refugees, a leading organization in supporting refugee-led organizations in East Africa.

I am also an Adjunct Assistant Professor at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and have a Masters in International Education from Columbia's Teachers College. I'm a long-time mentor with the Lower Eastside Girls' Club. As the daughter of a proud, card-carrying. New York State United Teachers' member, and now sitting in front of a classroom herself, I understand that there is nothing more important than ensuring a bright future for our children with a high-quality education. I am also firmly committed to delivering affordable child care for our working families. This has never been more important than it is now.

**Please review your answers by clicking PREVIEW ANSWERS below. You can submit the questionnaire at the bottom of the preview page by clicking SUBMIT. Once you click SUBMIT, you will receive a confirmation email with a PDF file containing your responses. *If you don't see the email, please check your spam box.*** If you have any further questions, you may contact us at [candidates@citizensunion.org](mailto:candidates@citizensunion.org)

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