

# How Big Money Lost and Small Donors Won in the 2025 NYC Primary

## TRACKING HOW \$46 MILLION IN SUPER PAC SPENDING WENT NOWHERE IN A NEW YORK CITY ELECTION

### Summary

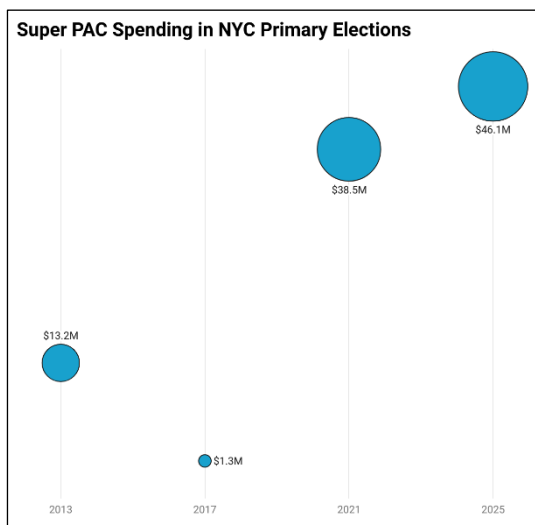
- The 2025 New York City Primary Election broke records for Super PAC spending. A staggering \$46 million was spent by Independent Expenditure entities, known as Super PACs, to support or oppose candidates in citywide, boroughwide, and City Council races.
- Enabled by the United States Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, these big donors and corporations were able to avoid New York City's strict donation and spending limits in an attempt to sway our local democracy.
- They failed. In most competitive races where Super PACs invested heavily in support of or in opposition to a specific candidate, their preferred candidate lost.
- Instead, candidates running campaigns powered by small donors and New York City's public campaign finance program were able to defeat big-money interests and win.
- The City's matching funds program encourages the cultivation of small-dollar donors, while our "paid for by" disclosure laws expose the top donors bankrolling heavily funded ads and mailers. Such laws help reduce the impact of major players like Airbnb, Uber, DoorDash, the real estate lobby, and ultra-wealthy donors.
- Examples include
  - The mayoral race, where \$26.6 million went to support Andrew Cuomo and oppose Zohran Mamdani, who won the Democratic primary.

- The Manhattan Borough President race, where about \$340,000 in Super PAC spending supported Keith Powers' unsuccessful campaign.
- Council District 21 in Northwestern Queens, where \$864,000 was spent in support of third-place finisher Yanna Henriquez—with \$482 spent per vote — the most by far in any race.
- The Sunset Park City Council race, with nearly \$490,000 spent to support a challenge to incumbent Alexa Avilés in the final weeks of the campaign.
- The Lower Manhattan Democratic primary council contest, where Super PACs spent the most money on negative ads outside the mayoral race in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Council Member Chris Marte.
- It wasn't only competitive races where we saw big Super PAC spending. In an alarming development, more than \$6 million was spent by Super PACs to support safe incumbents running for reelection who faced no strong opposition, an apparent attempt to curry favor with elected officials cruising to a second term.
- In addition, companies with business ties to the City spent well beyond the legal limits they can give campaigns under City's ethics laws, highlighting a persistent loophole in pay-to-play regulations allowed by the *Citizens United* decision.

All funding numbers in this report are drawn from the New York City Campaign Finance Board's public databases and refer to contributions and expenses made until primary day. All election results are based on NYC Board of Elections reporting as of July 15, 2025.

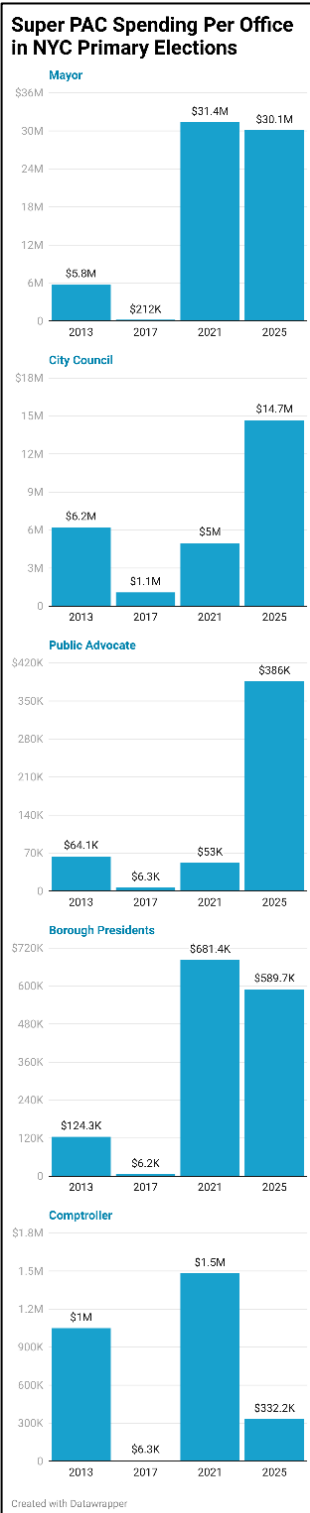
## Big Money in the 2025 Primary

Super PACs spent \$46,092,604 to influence the results of the 2025 New York City Primary Election. While most of that sum was spent on the **mayoral race**, outside spending occurred in almost every city race on the ballot: 36 citywide, boroughwide, and Council contests. This level of spending continues a post-Citizens United trend but marks a notable increase from prior years.



That's a nearly 20% increase from the primary election in 2021, which attracted \$38.5 million in Super PAC spending. That cycle featured far more open seats, including for mayor, comptroller, four borough presidents, and two-thirds of the City Council, and over 400 candidates ran for office. There were far fewer competitive races in 2025. Despite that, Super PAC spending this year was even higher, making it both more targeted and more concentrated.

In the 2025 **mayoral primary**, Super PACs spent \$30.1 million to boost or oppose six candidates, but 89% of that total went to either supporting Andrew Cuomo or opposing Zohran Mamdani. By contrast, in the 2021 mayoral race, \$31.4 million was distributed more evenly to support six candidates.



The **Public Advocate** race saw a jump in outside spending as well, with about \$386,000 spent to support two candidates, compared to only \$53,000 in 2021. The **Comptroller** race saw a decline, with \$332,000 evenly spent between the two frontrunners; it was more than four times that amount in 2021. **Borough President** primaries attracted about \$590,000 in Super PAC spending in 2025, down from \$681,000 in 2021.

The sharpest increase came in **City Council** races. Super PACs spent \$14.6 million to influence Council contests—almost three times the \$4.9 million spent in 2021, concentrated in about half the number of candidates. By comparison, the 2013 primary Council races attracted \$6.1 million, and the 2017 primary saw just \$0.9 million in outside spending.

Who were those outside spenders? Almost 20% of all Super PAC spending in this cycle came from Michael Bloomberg, who topped the donor list with \$10.9 million. Corporate funding also increased significantly: Airbnb gave \$5 million, DoorDash \$2.8 million, Uber \$2.5 million, the New York Apartment Association \$1.2 million, and Madison Square Garden's owners \$1.7 million.

Altogether, businesses gave \$18.6 million to Super PACs this cycle, up from just \$5.2 million in the 2021 primary. Labor union Super PAC activity dropped by half, totaling \$5.3 million, led by hotel workers and teacher unions (teacher unions alone spent \$5.7 million in the 2021 primary).

Independent Expenditures face no restrictions on the amount or source of their contributions and are nominally barred from coordinating with candidates. In practice, they draw almost exclusively big money donations that cross the City's fundraising limits. The average donation to Super PACs in this election was \$60,882, with a median of \$7,500. In contrast, the average donation to candidate committees was \$171, with a median of \$50. About two-thirds of those candidate contributions went to campaigns using the City's public matching funds program.

Super PACs are also exempt from the City's pay-to-play rules. For example, because Uber is on the City's Doing Business database, its executives cannot contribute more than \$250 to Council candidates. Yet Uber was able to give \$2.4 million across 12 Council races through its Super PAC—an average of almost \$203,000 per race. That's 812 times the City's contribution limit.

As has been [documented in research](#), Super PACs now deploy massive amounts of money to influence American elections, mostly from a small group



of the wealthiest donors and special interest groups, which wield disproportionate political influence and raises serious concerns about corruption.

## Big Money Lost the 2025 Primary

Despite the \$46 million Super PACs spent on the June primary election, they lost most competitive races that they heavily invested in. Candidates running local campaigns powered by small donors, who relied on New York City’s landmark public campaign finance program, were able to defeat big-money donors and win their elections.

Super PACs failed to elect their preferred candidates in eight major contests: New York City Mayor, Manhattan and Bronx Borough Presidents, and five City Council districts. They succeeded in just four competitive Council races.

In addition, the only two Council candidates in competitive races who opted out of the City’s matching funds program—and therefore faced no spending limits—both lost.

According to Citizens Union’s analysis, Super PACs spent \$30 million in total on losing campaigns in the 2025 primary in New York City.

Two races were not included in this analysis. In the Comptroller race, Super PACs supported the two leading candidates in roughly the same amount, and both campaigns had similar average-sized contributions and share of small donors. In the noncompetitive race for Public Advocate, although incumbent Jumaane Williams received higher Super PAC support than his challenger, it was not a significant money advantage for a citywide race.

The following analysis does not imply support for or opposition to any of the candidates, some of whom did not seek the outside spending on their behalf, but rather highlights the role that unregulated Super PAC spending played in the election.

Goal of Super PAC Spending	Amount	Outcome
Mayor – for Andrew Cuomo	\$26,687,612	Lost
Council District 21 – for Yanna Henriquez	\$864,023	Lost
Council District 30 – for Dermot Smyth	\$695,771	Lost
Council District 38 – for Ling Ye	\$489,174	Lost
Council District 39 – for Maya Kornberg	\$453,839	Lost
Manhattan Borough President – for Keith Powers	\$340,444	Lost
Bronx Borough President - for Rafael Salamanca	\$163,199	Lost
Council District 39 – against Chris Marte	\$320,392	Won



## **The Mayor's Race: Largest Investment Down the Drain**

Nowhere did Super PACs lose more than at the top of the ticket. They spent \$26.7 million to support Andrew Cuomo in the 2025 mayoral primary: \$18.4 million went toward direct support through ads, mailers, phone and text campaigns, leaflets, digital ads, billboards, and more. An additional \$8.2 million was spent by the same PACs to oppose Zohran Mamdani.

Although Fix the City Inc.—the main Super PAC backing Cuomo—essentially replaced his field operation and had three times the amount of money the official campaign had, it failed to turn these dollars into votes. Cuomo trailed Mamdani by 7.7% in the first round and 12.8% after Ranked Choice Voting—a margin of 82,484 and 129,915 votes, respectively. An [analysis by The CITY](#) found that the combined spending by Cuomo's campaign and Super PACs translated to \$87 per vote.

Zohran Mamdani was also supported by Super PACs, but on a much smaller scale. Two pro-Mamdani PACs spent just over \$1 million to support him and \$971,000 to oppose Cuomo. However, this outside support was not seen as central to his victory. Instead, Mamdani made full use of the City's public campaign finance system to achieve exactly what it was designed to do: connect candidates with everyday New Yorkers, allow more time for door-knocking instead of fundraising, and protect the democratic process from big-money influence.

He broke local fundraising records, receiving donations from 28,978 contributors and relying almost entirely on small donors. The average donation to his campaign was just \$88—the lowest in the race. He maxed out on the amount of private funds he can raise as part of the program, basing 76% of his campaign account on public funds. He also leveraged the City's strict disclosure laws to highlight the funders behind the ads attacking him ("paid for by" disclaimers) both in public messaging and on the debate stage.

Ultimately, Mamdani received more votes than any other Democratic mayoral nominee in the City's history, when accounting for Ranked Choice Voting tabulation.

## **Borough Presidents: Super PAC Loses in Manhattan and the Bronx**

The Manhattan Borough President race was among the most competitive of the cycle. Council Member Keith Powers and State Senator Brad Hoylman-Sigal each raised around \$1.7 million in public and private funds. But only Powers benefited from Super PAC support—\$340,444 in total. That effort failed. Hoylman-Sigal, who received no Super PAC support, won by about 10 points. For comparison, Super PACs spent just \$12,025 in the 2021 open-seat race for Manhattan Borough President, which was a competitive race.

In the Bronx, Airbnb's PAC invested more than \$163,000 to help Council Member Rafael Salamanca unseat Borough President Vanessa Gibson. Union PACs spent some \$65,000 supporting Gibson. Salamanca's campaign also relied on fewer, larger donations—his average contribution was \$425. He lost the election by 37 points.



### **Council District 21: \$482 per Vote in Northwestern Queens**

Uber spent nearly half a million dollars backing District Leader Yanna Henriquez for an open Council seat covering Corona, Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, East Elmhurst, and Lefrak City - the company's largest investment in a race in this election. The real estate and finance PAC New Yorkers For A Better Future added another \$223,000, and several unions contributed similarly. The \$864,000 total investment in Henriquez's candidacy yielded just 1,792 votes and a third-place finish with 23%. That's \$482 per vote—possibly the worst ROI of any Super PAC investment this cycle.

Winner Shanel Thomas-Henry had 70% more individual contributors than Henriquez and received 73% more votes in the final Ranked Choice round. She was also supported by Super PACs (representing charter schools and the Real Estate Board of New York) but by less than half the amount spent on Henriquez.

### **Council District 30: Almost \$700,000 for third place in Central Queens**

In the race to replace term-limited Council Member Bob Holden, United Federation of Teachers strategist Dermot Smyth seemed to be the favorite to win. Super PACs spent approximately \$696,000 backing Smyth—more than his two opponents raised combined. About half came from UFT and other unions; the rest from business PACs like Uber and MSG. Smyth finished with just 31% of the vote.

Phil Wong, a staffer for the incumbent council member, received the most small donations in this race - Smyth's average donation was \$245; Wong's was \$84 – and he won with 51.5% in the third round.

### **Council District 38: Last minute push fails to unseat Sunset Park incumbent**

Both Council Member Alexa Avilés and challenger Ling Ye ran small-donor-focused campaigns with average contributions around \$100. But Super PACs spent nearly \$490,000 supporting Ye or attacking Avilés in the final weeks of the campaign.

It didn't work. Avilés had more than double the contributors and votes, winning in the first round with 71%. Union PACs also supported Avilés but spent less than a third of what was spent for Ye.

### **Council District 39: Super PAC spending does not sway high-attention race**

Several Super PACs supported Maya Kornberg's challenge to Council Member Shahana Hanif in a district covering Park Slope and surrounding areas. Uber, MSG, and pro-charter school groups spent over \$374,000 backing Kornberg, while other PACs spent nearly \$80,000 opposing Hanif.

Hanif, supported by YIMBY organizations and labor Super PACs, benefited from about \$181,000 in outside spending—most went to attacking her opponent—less than half the amount favoring Kornberg. But Hanif had more than 1,000 contributors and more small donors. She won with 70% of the vote.



### **Council District 1: Downtown incumbent overcomes largest negative campaign**

Outside of the mayoral race, Council Member Chris Marte was the biggest target of Super PAC opposition. Super PACs spent over \$320,000 attacking his campaign—more than a participating candidate is allowed to spend themselves. An additional \$68,000 was spent to support two of his opponents.

One major challenger, Elizabeth Lewinsohn, also opted out of the public matching funds program, running a self-financed campaign totaling over \$915,000—the most of any Council candidate this cycle by far. Marte, meanwhile, relied on matching funds, had 839 individual contributors, 358 more than his closest rival, and received by far the most small donations in the race. He got 49% of the vote on first round and easily won the primary.

## **Where Big Money Still Won in the 2025 Primary**

Despite many losses, Super PACs had some victories. In the East Side's competitive **District 4** race, a mix of corporate and union PACs spent over \$461,000 to support Virginia Maloney. She won in the fifth round with 53%. But big money also failed elsewhere in the same race. Candidate Rachel Storch, who opted out of the City's matching funds system and spent \$497,000 using her own campaign committee, only finished third with 23%.

In East Bronx's **District 13**, union Super PACs spent over \$318,000 backing Shirley Aldebol, former Executive Vice President of 32BJ SEIU. She won in the sixth round with 56%.

In South Bronx **District 17**, PACs spent almost \$605,000 to support Justin Sanchez, who won in the fourth round with 62%.

**District 28** in Southeast Queens saw over \$1 million spent to elect Ty Hankerson, a staffer for outgoing Speaker Adrienne Adams. He won with 59% in the fifth round. His support came from a variety of Super PACs, some with competing interests, including Airbnb, hotel workers union, teacher unions, and pro-charter groups.

### **Council District 8: The people lose in a Super PAC arms race**

The race to replace Diana Ayala in East Harlem and South Bronx's District 8 may have been the most expensive Council race in city history, with more than \$2.5 million spent on a race that ended with fewer than 16,000 votes.

Early reporting [revealed](#) that a new Super PAC, funded by Wall Street investor Michael Jenkins, planned to spend \$1.6 million to support just one candidate in this race, Wilfredo López. Unusual for a Super PAC of this size, the founder had no business before the city. More unusual was that the group filed legal challenges to remove opponents from the ballot; it also [allegedly failed](#) to disclose some of its spending. In the end, it spent "only"





\$383,000—but its activity had triggered Super PACs arms race with nine other groups joining in.

A wide coalition of PACs spent more than \$829,000 to support Elsie Encarnacion, the incumbent's chief of staff. Clarisa Alayeto, a former charter school staffer, received almost \$328,000 in support from pro-charter PACs. In total, \$1.66 million was spent by Super PACs in this low-turnout race. Candidate campaign committees added another \$899,265 in spending, breaking spending records for this type of election. Encarnacion won in round seven with 59%.

## Big Money's Safe Bets on Safe Incumbents

Although Super PACs failed in many competitive races, they also spent large sums to support incumbents running unopposed or in uncompetitive contests. Super PACs spending in noncompetitive reelection campaign is not intended to assist an incumbent to win but rather to curry favors with sitting officials. Altogether, incumbents in relatively safe Council seats received more than \$6 million in Super PAC backing for their reelection campaigns.

The biggest spenders here were the same ones active in competitive races: Uber, Airbnb, DoorDash, business PACs, the United Federation of Teachers, the Hotel and Gaming Trades Council, and the Carpenters union.

For example, in Brooklyn's **Council District 41**, incumbent Darlene Mealy was supported by nearly a million dollars of Super PAC money, the most for any officeholder in the city, with almost two-thirds coming from just two groups representing Uber and other real estate and finance interests. Although Mealy faced seven primary challenges, this race was not considered a competitive one; her campaign committee raised only \$26,500, fewer than almost all incumbents this year.

In another instance, Super PACs spent almost \$878,000 to boost Council Member Kevin Riley's reelection campaign in Bronx's **District 12**. In Brooklyn, Crystal Hudson of **Council District 35** was supported by almost \$442,000 of Super PAC money. On Manhattan's west side Council Member Shaun Abreu's reelection bid for **Council District 7** was supported with over \$676,000 coming from nine different groups. In fact, Super PACs even spent money to support incumbents who were uncontested. In one unusual case, Airbnb's PAC paid for a billboard simply saying "Thank you, Councilwoman" for Farah Louis—who wasn't up for a primary election.

Massive spending like this is clearly not needed to win uncompetitive reelections. Council Members Erik Bottcher, Lincoln Restler, Chi Ossé, and Frank Morano all cruised to victory in their races without any support from Super PACs.



**Major Super PACs spending in noncompetitive  
reelection campaigns in the 2025 primary**

<b>Incumbent council member</b>	<b>Council District</b>	<b>Super PAC spending favoring the incumbent</b>
Darlene Mealy	41 (Central Eastern Brooklyn)	\$994,906
Kevin Riley	12 (Northeast Bronx)	\$877,668
Shaun Abreu	7 (Upper West Side)	\$676,267
Pierina Sanchez	14 (West Bronx)	\$635,519
Julie Menin	5 (Upper East Side)	\$592,498
Eric Dinowitz	11 (Northwest Bronx)	\$467,490
Althea Stevens	16 (Central Bronx)	\$451,891
Crystal Hudson	35 (Central Brooklyn)	\$441,608
Mercedes Narcisse	46 (Southeast Brooklyn)	\$389,562
Kamillah Hanks	49 (Staten Island North Shore)	\$201,715
Inna Vernikov	48 (Southern Brooklyn)	\$160,145
Carmen De La Rosa	10 (Northern Manhattan)	\$156,787
Shekar Krishnan	25 (Northwestern Queens)	\$99,631