



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Written Testimony to the New York City Campaign Finance Board

Post Election Hearing – 2025 Cycle

December 11, 2025

Good morning, members of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB). My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group that works to ensure honest and accountable government, fair and open elections, and a civically engaged public. We thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the 2025 election cycle.

First, we commend the Board's work in a challenging municipal election year, including its efforts to ensure compliance with the Campaign Finance Law and its investigations into potential violations. This work ensures that taxpayer dollars are well protected and elections remain clean.

The 2025 Election: A Win for Small Donors and Loss for Big Money

The 2025 cycle clearly demonstrated the strength of New York City's public campaign finance system. In an election cycle saturated with Super PAC money, Independent Expenditure Entities spent a record-breaking \$82.9 million to influence races up and down the ballot. The matching funds program nonetheless gave small-donor backed campaigns a meaningful chance to reach voters without dependence on large donors.

Citizens Union's post-primary analysis ¹ found that in most competitive races where Super PACs invested heavily for or against a candidate, the candidate they supported ultimately lost. This was true in the mayoral race as well as key borough president and city council contests. In total, IEs spent \$30 million on losing campaigns in the primary. Our forthcoming report on the general election shows a similar pattern. Big money IE spending targeted only the mayoral race, deploying an unprecedented cascade of attack ads (at least

¹ Citizens Union Policy Report. How Big Money Lost and Small Donors Won in the 2025 NYC Primary. July 2025
<https://citizensunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Citizens-Union-How-Big-Money-Lost-and-Small-Donors-Won-in-the-2025-NYC-Primary.pdf>

\$17.1 million in opposition communications). Yet this spending again failed to overcome broad-based, small-donor campaigns.

In sum, the City's public campaign finance system performed exactly as intended: it leveled the playing field for candidates, connected them with everyday New Yorkers, allowed more time for direct voter contact instead of high-dollar fundraising, increased transparency around the funders of attack ads through the "paid for by" requirement, and safeguarded the democratic process from outsized financial influence.

Recommendations for Reforms

The city's campaign finance system is successful because it evolves and improves after every election cycle. This hearing and the Board's recommendations next year are crucial for moving those reforms forward.

We appreciate the Board's adoption of two of our recommendations following the 2021 election.² In 2024, the Board amended its rules to more clearly define and regulate coordination between IEs and campaigns, including with respect to family members and former staff. In 2023, the City Council strengthened IE disclosure requirements for municipal ballot proposal spending. Both changes proved necessary this year.

Citizens Union's recommendations for further improvements include:

1. Close the loophole that allows top donors to obscure their identities through pass-through entities

During the general election, major donors exploited a gap in the disclosure rules to prevent their identities from appearing in the "paid for by" boxes on ads. Rather than giving directly to the IE running the ad, donors contributed to intermediary PACs, which then funneled the money elsewhere.

One such pass-through entity, Put NYC First Inc., was created in August and immediately began receiving and transferring six and seven figure donations. It raised \$8.6 million, averaging more than \$101,000 per donation, before distributing nearly all of the funds to seven IEs active in the mayoral race. Put NYC First was registered with the State Board of Elections. Other groups, such as Leaders We Deserve PAC, which appeared on ads as a top donor to the Working Families Party IE, were not registered in New York, making it impossible for voters to identify the original donors behind those ads. (Because that group was not created specifically for this race, voters could locate separate information about its goals and activities.)

² Citizens Union. Testimony Before the New York City Campaign Finance Board: Post-Election Hearing – 2021 Election Cycle. December 16, 2021. <https://citizensunion.org/document/2021-12-16/testimony-before-the-new-york-city-campaign-finance-board-post-election-hearing-2021-election-cycle/>

The “paid for by” disclaimers are essential for voters, candidates, and the press to understand who is financing often aggressive political advertising. The CFB should ensure that this transparency requirement is not weakened. Donor disclosure layering and nesting is an issue elsewhere as well, and we encourage the Board to review best practices to prevent this loophole from being exploited further.

2. Support legislation closing intermediary loopholes in disclosures and lobbyist donation limits

This election cycle again revealed significant weaknesses in the rules governing intermediaries, also known as bundlers, in several incidents.³ We support the following changes.

First, registered lobbyists and people with business before the City can bypass contribution limits by “bundling” donations from others, a loophole that gives those insiders greater access to officeholders, and is popular with large lobbying firms. Their bundling should be capped. Legislation to curb lobbyist bundling has been introduced in the City Council.⁴

Second, campaigns can avoid reporting intermediaries when fundraising occurs at an event paid for by the campaign, even in part. They also do not have to report intermediaries who raise funds online through personalized links. We appreciate the CFB’s work to close this loophole. Legislation addressing these disclosure gaps has also been introduced.⁵

3. Ensure candidates cannot use Council letterhead to evade blackout period restrictions on electioneering mailers

In the lead-up to the November 2025 election, the New York City Council launched a broad campaign opposing three ballot proposals, including millions of dollars in

³ Chris Bragg and Julia Rock. “Cuomo Failed to Disclose Lobbyists Who Bundled Donations.” New York Focus, March 20, 2025. <https://nysfocus.com/2025/03/20/andrew-cuomo-campaign-finance-bundlers>; Julia Rock and Chris Bragg. “The Behind-the-Scenes Rainmakers of Andrew Cuomo’s Campaign.” New York Focus, March 28, 2025. <https://nysfocus.com/2025/03/28/andrew-cuomo-mayoral-election-fundraising-finance>; Greg B. Smith and Yoav Gonen. “The Secret Bundlers Behind Eric Adams’ Campaign Fundraising Revealed”. The CITY, Sept. 5, 2025. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2025/09/05/secret-bundlers-eric-adams-campaign-disclosure-intermediary/>; David Brand. “Developer who bundled thousands for Adams picked to build on city-owned Coney Island lot.” Gothamist, October 29, 2025

⁴ Intro 0953-2024 <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6716410&GUID=80714DE1-F534-4096-B689-CE78E62DA55B&Options=&Search=>

⁵ Intro 0953-2024-A <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6716410&GUID=80714DE1-F534-4096-B689-CE78E62DA55B&Options=&Search=>

mailers sent citywide.⁶ This was likely a violation of Charter 1136.1's prohibition on using government funds for electioneering – a ban not under the CFB's jurisdiction.

The CFB does, however, regulate the improper use of government resources for mass mailings by public servants who are candidates in the 90 days before an election, known as the blackout period (Charter § 1136.1(4)).

It is probable that public servants who were barred from mailing their constituents circumvented the rule by sending mailers under Council letterhead instead of their own. The Charter explicitly forbids public servants who are candidates from “participating” in, or “causing another person to” use government resources for mass mailings. CFB guidance⁷ also specifies that such mailers must not contain campaign-related, electioneering, or promotional content.

The increase in charter commissions and local ballot proposals means that, if unchecked, more candidates will use government resources for electioneering mass mailers during the blackout period by hiding behind another government entity's branding.

The CFB should take steps to prevent this practice from expanding, including by investigating whether violations occurred in 2025 and issuing rules, guidance, or advisory opinions that bar candidates from improperly "hiding" behind Council or other governmental letterheads.

4. Analyze voter participation by unaffiliated voters in the 2025 election cycle

The CFB's Annual Voter Analysis Report provides valuable insights for policymakers and democracy advocates seeking to expand participation. We request that the Board continue its review of unaffiliated voters in the next report. Specifically, it is important for the public to know whether, to what extent, and where unaffiliated voters cast ballots in the general election, as well as the number, age, and location of unaffiliated voters who switched to a major party ahead of the 2025 primary.

Given the heightened interest in this topic in 2025, particularly during the Charter Revision Commission hearings, more data-driven analysis of these voters and their behaviors would meaningfully contribute to the public debate.

⁶ See more here: Citizens Union. Why Am I Getting Electioneering Mailers from the City Council? An Explainer. October 23, 2025. <https://citizensunion.org/document/2025-10-23/why-am-i-getting-electioneering-mailers-from-the-city-council-an-explainer/>

⁷ New York City Campaign Finance Board. Restrictions on Resources Guidance. https://nyccfb.info/PDF/guidance/restrictions_on_resources.pdf