



**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN
VOTERS OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

4 WEST 43rd STREET, SUITE 615, NEW YORK, NY 10036
PHONE: (212) 725-3541 • FAX: (212) 725-3443
WWW.LWVNYC.ORG • OFFICE@LWVNYC.ORG

**Testimony for the NYC Campaign Finance Board Hearing
December 1, 2009
Submitted by Laura Altschuler, Co-Chair**

As an early and consistent supporter of public campaign financing, I am pleased to speak on behalf of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York at today's hearing to comment on the effectiveness of this year's campaign finance program. As our organization is celebrating its 90th year of encouraging citizen participation in the electoral process, we are particularly appreciative of your efforts to produce an informative Voter Guide and televised debates for city-wide offices. The League was chosen by the CFB as one of the debate sponsors and much of what we say today came from the surveys which were filled out online or submitted at some of our public meetings.

Our survey responses and phone calls came from people who actually voted in this very low turn-out election. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents were enrolled in a party that had a primary election. They watched the debates, even remembered many of the sponsors and 50% changed their minds as to who to vote for as a result of the debates. Many favored additional "town hall" formats where candidates would speak to each other. A significant number expressed annoyance at what they considered to be "frivolous" questions asked of the city-wide candidates. There was also interest in having community forums for City Council races. We tried to accommodate these types of forums but found it difficult to get free convenient space and have all the candidates agree to a date. We were successful in having the Manhattan City Council Primary debates air on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network and other local cable stations also featured debates. We recommend that City Council candidates running in contested races and receiving public financing be required to participate in such forums which could be aired on Public Access and the NYC cable stations and publicized through the Campaign Finance Board's media outlets.

While the Campaign Finance Board's website is clearly more user friendly and easier to navigate, we did receive complaints that the public section was not easy to use if one wanted to track the contributions of all of the candidates in a particular race. Public

access and use of the website would be facilitated if at least the alphabetical listing included a district or office designation or preferably, if the candidate contribution records could be accessed or grouped by office and district as well as by alphabet.

The final financial disclosure forms had not been completed when we were preparing this testimony, so we cannot know the totals raised and spent. However, we remain concerned that candidates are still receiving full public funding when they have little or no opposition. We still need to find a way to either limit reimbursements or require the return of all, or a portion of the match when there was no real contest. At present, there is no incentive for a candidate to limit spending, short of the cap provided by the law. While we have never met a candidate who was convinced he or she would win without spending everything that could be raised, we fear that the public is becoming disenchanted with excessive amounts of campaign literature and intrusive ‘robo’ phone calls partially paid for with their money.

Most surveyed felt a 6 to 1 match was too high. The League is not prepared at this time to recommend a change for the next election cycle because we anticipate that the total dollar amount of matching funds may stay the same or be lower than that spent in the last election because the matched amount was reduced from \$250 to \$175. This is one of the areas that should be reviewed after the final 2009 accounting.

We are encouraged by your reports that in fact the number of small contributions have increased as a result of this change. Expanding the base of campaign contributions is a very positive outcome of our public financing system and we applaud your efforts to achieve this.

We give high marks to the Voter Guide and appreciate the difficulty in gathering and distributing all the information in a timely manner. In previous years we recommended that you at least list other-than-city offices which are on the ballot. While you didn't do it this year, even with the highly competitive Democratic primary for District Attorney in Manhattan, we urge you to reconsider this for future guides. We are appreciative that at the League's request (and presumably others) you made corrections between the primary and general election editions, listed a website for judges and added the two state ballot issues in the general election guide. We did receive complaints by phone and survey about receiving multiple voter guides in different languages, or not receiving one in English. Callers to our telephone information service were given the information as to how to access the Voter Guide on line and we also had a link on our website. Perhaps you should call it “The Official New York City Voter Guide” so that it is not confused with tabloids or campaign literature.

The League was pleased to be one of the debate sponsors and we will study the effects of this year's debates as we come up with ideas for 2013. We know that many viewers tuned in online during and after the debates and we need to improve voters' access to the sponsors so that they can submit their topics and questions. Despite the concern that a self-financed candidate might not participate – these debates are part of our political fabric and it is unlikely that any candidate would turn down the opportunity to debate days before an election. Our “leading contender” mayoral debate, sponsored and aired on WABC-TV and WXTV 41 was picked up by Channel 13 and WNYC and repeated on foreign language radio and TV networks, quoted in the press and remained online through Election Day.

The publicity given to the debates and the Voter Guide by the Campaign Finance Board was a positive feature of the 2009 campaign. What we need to do next is make it more compelling for the voter to go to the polls. The League works with the Board of Elections, the Campaign Finance Board and other civic organizations to make that happen.

Whatever changes are made in the program going forward, we commend you for reaching out for recommendations and implementing them. Despite all your best efforts and those of organizations like the League, we did not do well in increasing voter turnout. We all need to do more so that the public goes to the polls and holds their elected officials accountable. In addition to the usual reasons given, such as my vote doesn't make a difference, many surveyed were dismayed by the change in term limits and we know that some candidates withdrew and others ran for re-election because of the ability to run for a third term. The Campaign Finance Board needs to take these unexpected events into account and make sure that the financial playing field remains fair and that monies collected can not be used as a war chest for future races or distributed to other candidates.

We continue to support a strong public financing system. Its value is in no way undermined by the presence of constitutionally protected self-financed campaigns. While it is highly unlikely that we will ever again see a campaign financed so disproportionately to its opponent's, public financing helped that opponent and hundreds of candidates in other city races have a fairer and more level playing field. For some, public campaign financing was the only way they could run for office. We believe broadening the field of potential candidates improves our democracy and we commend you for all that you are doing to pursue this worthy endeavor.

