

Groups Seek to Pressure Cuomo on Campaign Finance Reform

by {ga=dking}

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ALBANY, N.Y. — It was during his [State of the State address](#) earlier this year that Gov. [Andre w Cuomo](#) decried New York's campaign finance system as beholden to corporate interests.

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“For most offices, New York State's contribution 'limits' are substantially higher than those of any other state that imposes limits,” Cuomo said. “Further, existing contribution limits for corporations are riddled with loopholes. In short, the state's campaign finance laws fail to prevent the dominance of wealthy contributors and special interests.”

Cuomo went on to prioritize putting tighter limits on campaign contributions and gradually phasing in a New York City-style campaign finance system with publicly-funded campaigns.

But since January 2011, the governor has [accepted \\$1.4 million in corporate donations](#) , drawing from a small group of donors for the maximum amount of money, according to his most recent campaign filing for the period ending in July.

Progressive advocates are desperately hoping that Cuomo follows through on campaign finance reform this year in a way that he didn't on his promise to support independent redistricting and to veto legislators' gerrymandered district lines.

The groups pushing the issue include a who's who of good government groups, labor coalitions and other factions -- [Common Cause](#) , [Citizen Action](#) , [The New Roosevelt Initiative](#) , [The Working Families Party](#) and [The Brennan Center](#) -- under the banner of [Fair Elections For New York](#)

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But the coalition is moving cautiously, cognizant that the issue will be difficult to move through the Legislature and because of lasting doubts about Cuomo's commitment to “progressive” or “politically contentious” issues.

“The fact that Andrew knows how to work the old culture well is a relief to voters. But that era is about past and now we must judge him not by his progressive statements but by his progressive accomplishments,” says Bill Samuels, of the New Roosevelt Institute.

Last week, Samuels' reform group [called on Cuomo](#) to give up his corporate donations in a statement, citing the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Citizen United case that has opened the national elections to a flood of corporate donations. “Such a step by the governor would be

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of national significance," the group said.

Yet there has been no response from Cuomo so far.

Meanwhile, state lawmakers have stopped talking about campaign finance reform.

Samuels says it doesn't look to him as if Cuomo even bothered to try to sell the Legislature on campaign finance reform.

"At some point it got pushed to the back burner and he never went out to sell it," Samuels says. "Having said that, the good news is there is a chance that it will be brought up for the 2013 session. He didn't have to bring it up, in theory."

Cuomo's office didn't respond to an emailed request for comment.

During a July 10 Red Room news conference, Cuomo [acknowledged](#) the difficulty in pushing the issue in Albany.

"The challenge with campaign finance is it's not high enough on the priority list for the people," Cuomo said noting that legislators "aren't hearing about it."

The governor said he expected to have to get out and sell the issue to the public. "To get something done, for me, in this town, I need to leave this town, wage a whole education effort and get the issue up to the top of the list."

Cuomo told reporters that he imagined legislation could be ready after the elections — possibly even before legislators are scheduled to return to session in January.

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But Cuomo has yet to launch a public education tour on campaign finance reform.

The state's campaign finance system is notoriously lax: It allows individuals to give up to \$60,800 to candidates running for statewide office. New York has the highest limits of any state that has limits. In California the limit is \$26,000 to gubernatorial candidates per election year and in Ohio the limit is \$11,543 for state wide candidate per year.

Most other states regulate how much individuals and corporations can give to a party but in New York a loophole allows basically unlimited donations to so-called "housekeeping accounts," which can then be used to boost candidates.

New York State's system is in stark contrast to that of New York City's, where restrictions on donations are much tighter and candidates can qualify for public matching funds.

But before Cuomo pushes on campaign finance reform, he has to deal with his own credibility issues head-on, progressives say.

Earlier this year, it was [revealed](#) that Genting, a casino gaming group, gave \$2 million to the Committee to Save New York — which has launched massive advertising and lobbying campaigns to support Cuomo's agenda — during the time he was crafting and considering casino gambling legislation and proposed a gigantic gaming facility with Genting in Queens.

"I understand the general idea that there's too much money in the political system," Cuomo said of the controversy with a Q&A with reporters at the National Puerto Rican Day Parade in Manhattan.

He then added: "I've worked with groups that represent the biggest companies in this state, the biggest labor unions in this state, distinguished citizens in this state, to create jobs, and that's what it's all about."

Bill Mahoney, of the [New York Public Interest Research Group](#), says that Cuomo is a master of taking advantage of the current system.

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“He certainly has been exploiting the current system better than any other candidate,” he said. “He is getting the most money out of a small pool and he has exploited every possible loophole.”

Mahoney also notes that labor groups have been donating significantly less to Cuomo than they did to his predecessors.

That may be because of the governor’s support of new pension tiers and his hard bargaining at the contract table. Regardless, Mahoney says it has resulted in Cuomo squeezing even more money out of a smaller group of corporate donors.

Mahoney recently issued an analysis of Cuomo’s donors that shows one man and his companies gave Cuomo a total of \$250,000 in the first 18 months of the election cycle. That man is Leonard Litwin, a New York City based luxury apartment developer who in 2006 ranked 374 on Forbes list of the top 400 richest people.

NYPIRG found that at least 102 donors gave Cuomo more than \$40,000 a piece. Cuomo has \$19.3 million on hand.

“The appearance in and of itself of a conflict of interest is very damaging to reform,” Samuels says.

Karen Scharff, of Citizen Action of New York, doesn’t agree with Samuels.

“In general, I think as long as the system is what it is you shouldn’t have to unilaterally disarm but you do owe the voters a strong determination to change the system,” Scharff says.

Samuels says he hasn’t seen Cuomo expend any “political capital” on campaign finance reform with the same gusto as other issues, such as same-sex marriage.

Cuomo has the backing of the myriad groups aligned with Fair Elections New York, and of [NY Lead](#) — a group of very influential and wealthy New Yorkers including former Mayor Ed Koch, the son

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of George Soros, Barry Diller and Chris Hughes.

They are pushing Cuomo in the same way that Samuels is — by appealing to his ego and political instincts by telling the popular governor that acting on the issue especially in the light of all the national attention Citizens United is getting — will cast him as a reformer, not only in New York but nationally.

But Koch isn't enthusiastic about the chances for reform on the state level.

"There isn't as much interest as I hoped there would be," he says. "It's always hard to get the Legislature to support something that would give their opponents equal funding."

As for Cuomo acting on the issue to get acclaim on a national stage, Koch says it sounds like a nice idea.

"That's a very good thought, I hope it works but I'm not aware of any action," he says. "To me the most important thing would be a constitutional amendment."

Mahoney is equally as cautious as Koch. "For two years, the governor has said a lot of great things about campaign finance reform but he hasn't done anything, but I don't think he is the kind of politician who would say things just to score points. There hasn't been a bill yet and that is the true indicator of how serious the effort will be," Mahoney says.

Mahoney warns that there is no half measure on campaign financing reform. "Public finance wouldn't work without closing the loopholes," he says. Currently, corporations and individuals can donate unlimited amounts of money to party's house keeping accounts.

Meanwhile, as advocates wait for Cuomo to take action, different plans are being touted in Albany designed to provide alternative funding for the public financing of elections so that the public wouldn't reject the proposal out of hand because it uses taxpayer funds.

But Mahoney says it is too soon to talk about them. "I've heard proposals tossed around but without hearing the governor and other leaders' positions it's hard to gauge what is serious."

Scharff says that the cost would likely be about "less than one percent of the state budget" and the gain would strongly justify the expense.

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“Campaign finance is fundamentally necessary for us to get fair policy, to get a fair minimum wage to get a fair tax system, for us to own our elections,” she says.

She says she is unaware of the governor’s plans, but she thinks a special session, one that is rumored to be scheduled for December and will likely include a vote on raises for legislators, is a perfect opportunity to pressure legislators and to bring reform to a vote.

“They owe it to us pass something that gives us fair elections,” she says.

It seems unlikely that there be any pledges collected this year, that the issue of campaign finance will be used a political litmus test like during the election season of 2010 when Koch collected signatures of legislators who promised to support independent redistricting only to later oppose it.

The Republican Senate Campaign Committee [issued a message to supporters](#) blasting the push for public funding for elections, calling it a cash grab by the broke Senate Democrats.

Senate Democrats have presented campaign finance reform packages of their own and have been pushing Cuomo on the issue.

Democrat Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver was the only one of Albany’s three leaders to have [attached his name to a piece of campaign finance legislation](#) , but it didn’t get support from Cuomo or Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, who has openly opposed public financing of elections.

Sen. [Liz Krueger](#) , a Democrat who has supported the various campaign finance reform packages over the years, says that despite her hopes it is not apparent to her that a deal on a major reform package is imminent.

“You really need two of the three players to really want to do it, and they have to either embarrass the third guy or give him something that he wants in trade for it,” she says.

She also says a slow build of public education will be needed to get voters to pressure their

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legislators.

As for the election season, Krueger says she doesn't think a presidential election year will lend itself to a major push on a statewide issue.

"There are no statewide elections for us, so the big policy issues remain with feds," she says.

But she says the story of the 2012 Presidential campaign will be the money that was spent by PACS thanks to the Citizens United decision and that that will give someone — perhaps even a certain ambitious governor — the chance to make hay of the issue.

"He could be there to be the hero," she says.