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News Coverage on EffectiveNY

NY proposal: Use casino money to fund NY campaigns

[Associated Press](#) [1] [2] [2] [2] [2]

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ALBANY, N.Y. — An innovative proposal expected in the New York Legislature would take some revenue from casino promoters and opponents who spend millions in campaign contributions and create a fund designed to reduce the influence of money in politics.

Good-government advocate Bill Samuels and Democratic state Sen. Liz Krueger said Monday that the money from the proposal expected to be introduced to the new Legislature would pay for voluntary public funding of campaigns and level the playing field for candidates, creating more competitive elections. They say it would also open politics to more people without depending on large contributions from special interests.

It may also be a unique way to channel gambling money. A dozen states use casino tax revenue most often for education, local governments, and the state general fund, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. New Jersey uses some for financial assistance to the elderly and disabled, while Colorado and South Dakota target some for historic preservation, and Puerto Rico uses some for tourism.

New York's so-called "grand bargain" would seek to tap into an anticipated deluge of campaign contributions from supporters and opponents of the proposal to allow casinos on non-Indian land in New York. The call for a publicly paid, matching fund system, as in New York City, has grown louder nationwide after the U.S. Supreme Court allowed a freer hand for corporations and other well-financed interests to fund massive TV ad blitzes under the Citizens United decision in 2010.

"Where casino gaming interests in other states have become a force for some of the darkest excesses of post-Citizens United politics ... this unique, counterintuitive opportunity is a way

forward on government reform that Governor Cuomo and my fellow legislators cannot ignore," said Krueger, a Manhattan Democrat.

The Legislature is expected to approve up to seven casinos off Indian land this year, subject to a voter referendum in the fall.

New York's proposal would use casino licensing fees to raise \$56 million a year for matching funds for contributions to candidates under strict limits, but still leave \$250 million to \$1 billion that could be directed to education, as is now done with lottery revenues.

"Campaign finance reform is at the heart of changing a state Legislature that seems to be driven by four- and five-figure checks from special interests," said Samuels, founder of the New Roosevelts government reform group. "Getting money out of politics will usher in a new era where legislators can focus on the needs of the people they represent, and enable the election of a new generation of reform-minded individuals who, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, see public service as a noble profession and not as a way to accumulate power and dole out favors to campaign contributors."

Cuomo and the Assembly's Democratic majority have supported voluntary public financing of campaigns as part of stricter fundraising and spending requirements, but the Senate's Republican majority has opposed public financing, saying that tax dollars must instead go to schools and other high priorities, especially in tough economic times.

Republicans who run the Senate with the Independent Democratic Conference were cool to the proposal idea Monday. GOP spokesman Scott Reif said any public funding should go to tax relief or underprivileged schools.

Cuomo said there are many expenses facing state government, including schools and relief for victims of Superstorm Sandy, but said public financing of campaigns should be part of an effort that includes lower donation limits.

Neither Cuomo nor Senate Republicans ruled out the casino idea.

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