

Stand By Your Assemblyman? Past Supporters of Vito Lopez Weigh the Pros and Cons

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By [Jen Dev](#), [Jonathan Wiener](#) and [Jie Jenny Zou](#)

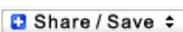
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Photo Credit: Associated Press

A highly publicized **sex scandal** involving two women and a **secret six-figure payoff** has not deterred longtime assemblyman **Vito J. Lopez** (D-Brooklyn) from continuing his bid to represent the 53rd district of Bushwick and Williamsburg. But it has left some loyal contributors on the fence as they decide whether to support a tarnished candidate.

Lopez is accused of sexually harassing two women, and then paying the women over \$100,000 of government funds to keep silent about the incident. Fellow democrats in the New York State Legislature, including Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senator Chuck Schumer, have **called on Lopez to resign**, but he is running for office again in November against Republican challenger Richy Garcia—the on-again off-again candidate who, as the **New York Daily**

News reports, “has raised no money, created no website and recruited no campaign volunteers.”

Lopez **resigned his chairmanship** of the Kings County Democratic Party shortly after the scandal broke in late August. He faces heavy opposition from within the legislature after being censured. Lopez is not without support, but even those who continue to stand behind him seem to do so warily.

The New York State Public Employee Federation (PEF), a labor union, has contributed \$2,900 to Lopez since 2004 and endorsed his bid for reelection on August 23—just one day before the scandal broke. Still, spokesperson Sherry Halbrook, explained that the union’s “endorsement process concluded before any of the allegations against Mr. Lopez surfaced. Given the serious nature of these allegations, PEF is reviewing—consistent with our internal process—any endorsement support for Assemblyman Lopez’s campaign.”

The federation has not withdrawn its endorsement even though it has received internal pressure from members to cut ties to Lopez. On the group’s **Facebook page**, for example, a few members of the organization have commented on the federation’s continued support for Lopez. A union member wrote, “I find it amazing that PEF has not withdrawn this endorsement yet. Is PEF saying that it is OK to sexually harass someone as long as you vote ‘our way’ when it comes to pro-union legislation?”

Lopez was instrumental in bringing political attention to the federation’s ongoing campaign to prevent the closing of the **Kingsboro Psychiatric Center**. In March, he brought together a dozen members of the State Assembly and Senate to a federation meeting and later formed a task force comprised of legislators and unions to keep the center in Brooklyn.

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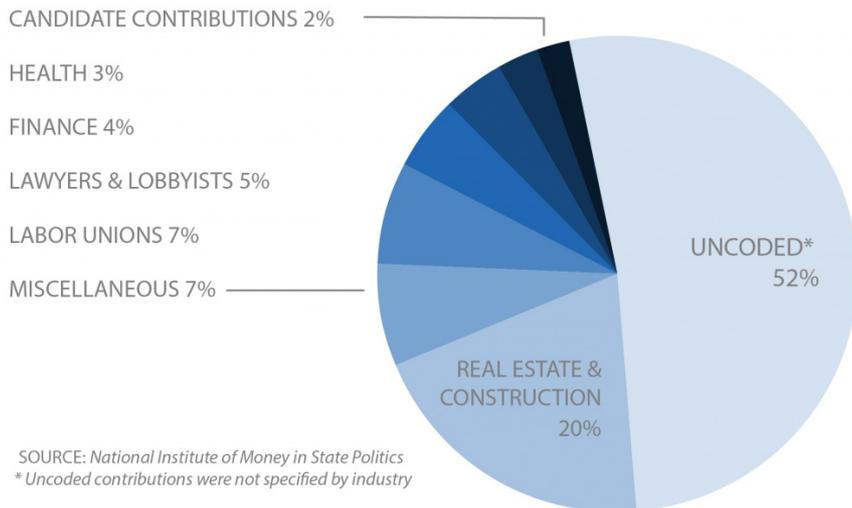
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TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS BY INDUSTRY

1998 to 2012



Another group that has long supported Lopez is advocates and builders of affordable housing, Lopez's largest block of contributors. The industry has benefitted from close ties with the assemblyman, who served as chairman of the housing committee before being censured. From 2011 to 2012, more than 20 of the 60 bills sponsored by Lopez related directly to affordable housing, and another 10 bills oversaw construction and real estate development.

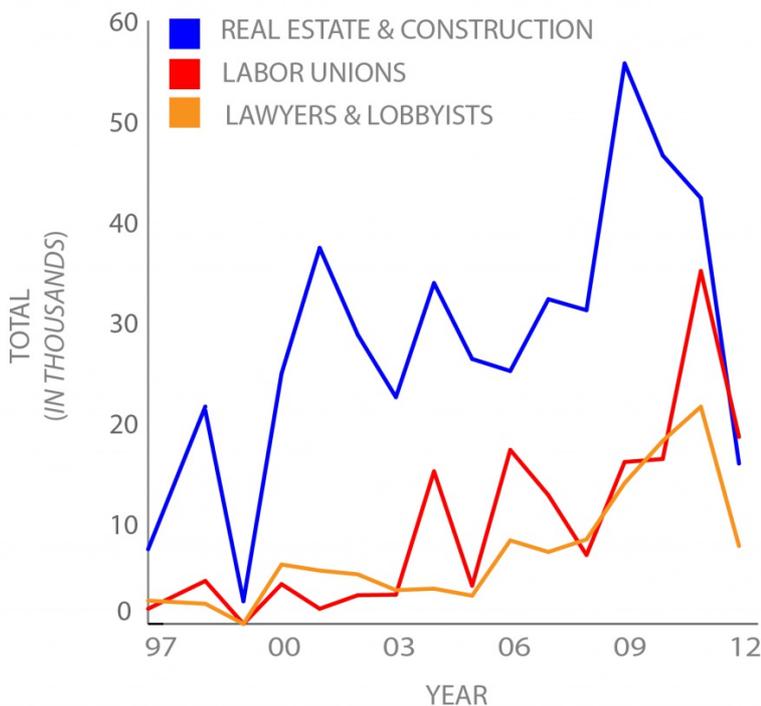
Lopez's most prominent housing donors include the New York State Association for Affordable Housing, which has donated more than \$18,000 to Lopez since 2005. A spokesman for the trade association, which has more than 300 members, declined to comment on whether the organization would continue its support.

John Frezza, who co-founded the association, also serves as president of Strategic Construction, a development firm that has donated over \$13,000 to Lopez since 1998. A spokesperson for the firm refused to comment.

Co-founder Donald Capoccia, who also manages a local development firm, has contributed approximately \$11,750 to Lopez since 2003. Capoccia has helped develop 3,000 housing units in New York City. He did not return calls for comment.

Randy Lee, another prominent developer, has supported Lopez's campaigns with individual contributions as well as donations from his real estate company and his law practice. The Building Industry Association of New York City, which Lee chairs, has donated \$4,500 since 2006. Lee did not return calls or emails.

LEADING CONTRIBUTOR INDUSTRIES



SOURCE: National Institute of Money in State Politics

One of Lopez's most loyal donors is the New York State Chiropractic Association, a trade organization, that has donated over \$23,000 to Lopez's campaigns since 1998. The association has donated to other local politicians, including Lopez's Senate ally, Martin Malave Dilan, but Lopez is their top recipient.

"Vito's been able to get things done," said David L. Heffer, a treasurer in the group's Rochester district and a former organizer for the association's political action committee "He's been willing to ring up some bills for us."

Heffer said Lopez has been a longtime champion for chiropractors in the state. He referred, in particular, to legislation Lopez sponsored in 2011 allowing chiropractors to form limited liability companies. Heffer would not comment on whether he thought the association should continue supporting Lopez in light of recent charges, but, "Mr. Lopez has been kind enough to listen to us," he said, "And making contributions to his campaign has not hurt that situation."

The association's executive offices in Albany declined to comment, but one member, Peter Holst, who has also served as organizer for the association's political action committee, said he considers Lopez to be more of a liability than an asset. "Chiropractic has not enjoyed the most favorable press over the years," explained Holst, referring to how chiropractic services were once boycotted by the American Medical Association. "If we have someone representing us in Albany that person better be squeaky clean," said Holst.

Following the scandal, Lopez's political allies, such as [Chris Olechowski](#), have distanced themselves from the assemblyman, though they still draw upon his resources to help win their elections. Olechowski, who is running to be district leader in the 50th Assembly District, uses Lopez's Bushwick United Democratic Club for local mailings while simultaneously calling on Lopez to leave the assembly. Meanwhile, [Frank Seddio](#), another Lopez ally, was elected chairman of the Kings County Democratic Party in September, following Lopez's resignation.

Still, as the consequences of the scandal become clearer, people and organizations with ties to Lopez continue to weigh the costs and benefits of maintaining support for the disgraced assemblyman.

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