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N.J.'s Gubernatorial Public Financing Program needs to be readjusted before next election

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BY JEFF BRINDLE

COMMENTARY

Six governors can't be wrong.

From Brendan Byrne to Chris Christie, every governor since 1977, except Jon Corzine, has participated in New Jersey's Gubernatorial Public Financing Program.

The Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) recently adjusted the various thresholds and limits that apply to the program.

By law the adjustments are made every four years. In many ways they account for the success of the program.

Adjusting contribution limits, public funds caps, and expenditure limits allows the program to keep pace with inflation, permitting qualified candidates to run effective campaigns.

The limits and thresholds are adjusted using a unique formula that measures the inflationary impact on advertising costs and on other goods and services related to gubernatorial campaigns.

The formula combines Magna Global's media inflationary index with the CPI. Both indices measure inflation in the New York/Philadelphia region.

By using this formula, the Commission is able to more accurately adjust the thresholds and limits to reflect the true inflationary impact on campaigns.

The Commission began automatically adjusting gubernatorial thresholds and limits in the primary of 1993.

In the later part of the 1980s, the Commission produced two reports that called on the Legislature to enact legislation that would allow for the adjustment of contribution and expenditure limits, qualification thresholds, and public funds caps.

It did so to save the program.

If the Legislature did nothing, candidates for governor would be participating in a program more appropriate for 1981 rather than for 1989.

That is if they participated at all.

The thresholds and limits would have been so eroded by eight years of inflation that it may well have been more beneficial for candidates to opt out of the program.

Fortunately, the Legislature and then Governor Thomas H. Kean heeded the Commission’s warning and enacted legislation that not only adjusted the thresholds and limits for the 1989 contest but required the program to be automatically adjusted every four years starting in 1993.

Moreover, it incorporated into the statute the formula to measure the cost of campaigning proposed by the Commission in its 1988 report.

The Gubernatorial Public Financing Program has been the bedrock of campaigns for governor in New Jersey since its inception in 1977.

It has kept these campaigns free of even the appearance of corruption and has allowed qualified candidates of limited personal wealth to run effective campaigns for governor, and even win.

The automatic adjustments to the thresholds and limits have contributed to the program’s continued viability.

And, just like it was so important to make adjustments to the program in 1989, it is every bit as critical to have adjusted the thresholds and limits going into the next gubernatorial go-round.

Aside from keeping pace with inflation, the adjustment will help participating candidates offset the influence over the process of outside, independent groups that surely will be participating in a big way next year.

Without the program, the campaigns of gubernatorial candidates would be drowned out by the super PACs and other non-profits that promise to spend millions in the upcoming campaign.

The Public Financing Program, recognized throughout the country, has been an integral part of elections in New Jersey since 1977. Now it is more important than ever.

Legislative and gubernatorial action in 1989, and the Commission’s earlier pronouncements, saved a program that other states have looked to as a model and our citizens can point to with pride.

Because of the automatic adjustments, gubernatorial campaigns can keep pace with inflation and the program can avoid the fate of the all but defunct presidential program.

Jeff Brindle *is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.*