



Strengthen political parties to offset increased spending by independent groups, says Jeff Brindle

JEFF BRINDLE • March 17, 2018

For The Press

In four legislative elections since 2011, so-called dark-money groups drilled down with more than \$3.7 million in independent spending in the 2nd Legislative District.

With the 2nd District among the most competitive in the state, that figure would have been tops in the state among legislative districts if not for \$14 million spent by dark-money groups in neighboring 3rd District this past November.

Dark money is campaign funding whose source isn't required to be disclosed, although it often is. Dark-money groups are independent committees operated by special interests outside the control of parties or candidates. They are often anonymous, not regulated by state law, and often exempt from disclosing their activities.

Seventeen Atlantic county communities, including Atlantic City, comprise the 2nd District. Attesting to its competitiveness, the district is represented by state Sen. Chris Brown, a Republican, and Democratic Assemblymen Vince Mazzeo and John Armato.

If history is a guide, this district will continue to be highly competitive, a sure invitation to significant, if not overwhelming, dark money involvement in the future.

What has occurred in the 2nd District reflects statewide trends at all levels of government.

For instance, between the state elections of 2005 and 2017, dark-money spending grew by more than 11,000 percent. From \$411,224 in 2005 dark-money independent spending climbed to \$47.5 million in 2017. In comparison, state and county parties spent \$48 million in 2005 and \$26 million 2017, a complete reversal of fortune.

The local level of government has not escaped the onslaught of dark money either.

In 2013 a federal super PAC spent \$176,116 on the Elizabeth School Board race while dark-money interests spent \$251,629 in Jersey City's mayoralty contest. A total \$5.5 million was spent in 2014 in Newark's mayoralty race and in 2015 a Washington, D.C., - based super PAC participated in Parsippany's primary election.

While this was happening, spending by municipal party committees was declining. Municipal parties throughout the state spent \$8.8 million in 2007 yet only \$4.4 million in 2017.

Back home in the 2nd legislative district dark-money groups spent \$588,000 in 2017, just \$100,000 less than the two county party committees in Atlantic County, which spent \$681,000.

A better barometer of things to come in the 2nd District may be the Assembly election of 2015, however. Dark-money groups dumped \$2.1 million into the 2nd District to influence the outcome of the election. The county organizations spent \$691,000.

To counter this trend, the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission has made several proposals that, if enacted, would strengthen the political parties and offset the influence of independent groups.

These proposals have been incorporated into legislation introduced by state Sen. Troy Singleton, D-7th, and Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker, D-16th. Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick, R-21st, has also introduced legislation.

The recommended reforms call for the following:

Independent groups – require registration and disclosure of contributions and expenditures;

Political parties – exempt them from pay-to-play laws, allow county parties to give to each other, allow participation in gubernatorial elections by state parties, and increase contribution limits.

Pay-to-play laws – consolidate into one state law, increase contract disclosure requirement to \$17,500 disclosed, end fair-and-open loophole, increase contractor donation amount to \$1,000, include PACs under the law, exclude political parties from the law, and require disclosure of contractor donations to independent groups.

While a strong political party system may not be a perfect solution, in terms of the public good it is considerably better than the alternative.

Political parties are accountable, regulated by New Jersey law, disclose their activities, and provide a cue to voting.

Whereas the public identifies candidates with their political party, there is no such connection in the public's mind between candidates and independent groups, allowing them to run questionable, often misleading, attack ads against the opponent of the candidate they support.

Another advantage of a strong party system is that it may help to improve upon the paltry voter turnout rate in recent years.

A main function of political parties is to get out the vote. During the 1993 gubernatorial and legislative elections, when state and county parties spent \$48 million and dark-money were non-existent, voters turned out at a rate of 65 percent. This year, with a weakened party system, turnout was 36 percent. In Atlantic County the turnout rate was 39 percent.

So strengthening the parties may bring more voters to the polls.

There is no more important issue than the integrity of the electoral system.

The Legislature has it within its power to establish an electoral system in the best interest of the public. Hopefully it will do so.

Jeff Brindle, of Flemington, Hunterdon County, is the executive director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.