



Opinion: Campaign finance debate must address escalating cost of running for office

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By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

By **Carl Golden**

The ongoing debate over New Jersey's system of financing political campaigns has focused almost exclusively on bans and prohibitions, loopholes and regulations, limits and caps.

Largely overlooked has been what is arguably the more salient point: It requires a great deal of money to mount a campaign for elected office in this state. Gone are the days when someone decided to run for the Legislature, booked an evening at the American Legion hall, bought a round of beers for the audience, passed the hat and called it a success.

The candidate typed news releases at his kitchen table and set up coffee klatches, hoping those attending brought their checkbooks.

Today, multimillion-dollar legislative campaigns are routine, spending on big-city mayoral contests reaches well into six figures, and freeholder and local council races have attained levels unheard-of a decade ago.

The money required to achieve viability and credibility is no longer in the coffee klatch crowd. Candidates spend as much time working the telephones to raise money as they do delivering speeches, knocking on doors and sitting for media interviews.

Those clamoring for reforms in the system seem reluctant to address this aspect of campaigning, suggesting that money is inherently evil, corrupting the giver and the receiver.

"Pay to play," aside from its alliterative appeal, has become shorthand for everything sinister and sordid in campaign finance.

Critics argue that those who contribute significant sums of money to a candidate or a political party are motivated by self-interest and fully anticipate something of value in return.

There is ample evidence to support their contention. New Jersey's landscape is littered with no-bid contracts, professional services retainers, major development approvals, zoning changes and hires that can be traced in some measure to campaign contributions.

Despite contribution limits and more rigorous regulation and reporting requirements, money continues to pour into the system simply because the demand for it has thoroughly outstripped the ability of a candidate to secure it.

Because of the limits on contributions to individual candidates, uncapped donations to political action committees — PACs — have become the fund-raising method of choice.

The PACs — all with noble-sounding names — take in the cash and distribute it to candidates, all entirely permissible under existing law.

PACs are viewed cynically because they often are controlled by party leaders or close associates and, rather than promote the ideals their names suggest, are a subterfuge to avoid contributions limits.

PACs drew renewed scrutiny with the recent revelations that the Middlesex County Democratic organization funded campaigns of municipal officials who then awarded contracts or acted on requests brought by those directly involved in PAC activities.

The fundamental issue remains: the explosive growth of campaign expenses, the need to appreciate it and the equally compelling need to devise a system in which the public can have confidence.

Professional campaign consultants, television and radio advertisements, targeted mailings, telephone banks, media outreach and get-out-the-vote efforts are extraordinarily costly and beyond the reach of an individual candidate. Without them, however, someone contemplating a run for public office shouldn't even bother to pick up nominating petitions.

By fund-raising full time and generating the money critical to success, PACs have guaranteed candidates all the components of a first-rate campaign.

Not surprisingly, they've become the targets of those who favor more stringent regulation to reduce the amount of money sloshing around in the system and curb what they contend is the undue influence of the donors.

Such recommendations, well-meaning and well-intentioned though they may be, again raise the question: Where or to whom can a candidate turn for financial support?

It is the rare individual who has the wherewithal and the inclination to self-finance, yet shutting off or curtailing the ability of organizations such as PACs to raise money could result in limiting the candidate pool to those who can write their own checks.

There is, moreover, no appetite in the Legislature for enacting a system of publicly funded campaigns, allocating potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer money to support political candidates. It's an idea that's been discussed periodically, but has never gained significant traction.

Others have suggested deregulating the system entirely, allowing unlimited contributions while requiring immediate public disclosure of donor, amount and recipient.

The reality is that the cost of campaigning is not going to decline. Indeed, it may increase in light of the introduction of new and expensive technology to aid candidates in everything from voter identification to media communications.

The current financing system could use revision and fine-tuning, particularly prohibiting so-called "wheeling," which allows shifting significant sums of money from county to county.

But legislators and groups who insist on sweeping changes or stricter limits and bans would do well to spend as much time examining the forces driving the escalating cost of campaigns.

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