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Independent Spending on 2018 NJ Congressional Races More Than Triples Previous High

JEFF BRINDLE • November 26, 2018, 4:01 pm

Spending by independent, outside groups reached an all-time high of \$49 million in this year's Congressional elections in New Jersey.

The record spending spree by these organizations, often called "Dark Money" groups because many evade disclosure rules, overwhelmed spending by state and county party entities within New Jersey, which together spent only \$8.1 million. Thus, outside groups this year outspent parties by over 600 percent.

In stark contrast, campaigns for a US Senate seat and congressional offices in 2002 drew zero independent spending while New Jersey party committees collectively spent almost \$34 million- nearly \$48 million in 2018 dollars.

Some readers might wonder what difference it makes whether parties or independent groups help pick up the bulk of the campaign tab. Especially since many independent spenders are aligned with parties if not directly controlled by them.

The main answer: fund-raising and spending by parties is far more accountable and transparent.

Despite this fact, Americans have always viewed political parties with suspicion. This is unfortunate given the increasing influence of independent groups over the state's elections.

Deeply rooted in the national psyche are visions of cigar-smoking political bosses making corrupt, backroom deals while pulling the strings of government.

In the late 1800's, at the height of machine politics, cartoonist Thomas Nast undertook a campaign against Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall. One of his cartoons depicts the men of Tammany Hall all pointing to each other in answer to the question "who stole the people's money."

This antipathy toward political parties had actually begun much earlier in the nation's history. By the 1790's, factions emerged within Congress that to many threatened the unity of the fledgling republic.

A sketch at the time depicted "the inevitable danger of factions" by showing a member of the Federalist party caning a representative of the Jeffersonian party.

Reinforcing this image, President George Washington, in his farewell address to the nation, warned against the divisiveness wrought by faction, or party.

Said Washington "[political parties] . . . are likely . . . to become potent machines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and usurp for themselves the reins of government."

This belief persisted throughout the nation's history. Despite major reforms during the progressive era and beyond, the aversion to political parties lingers to the present day.

The fact that this perception of political parties grips the minds of many people makes it harder to confront the new, bigger monster- Dark Money, which now threatens the integrity of the electoral process.

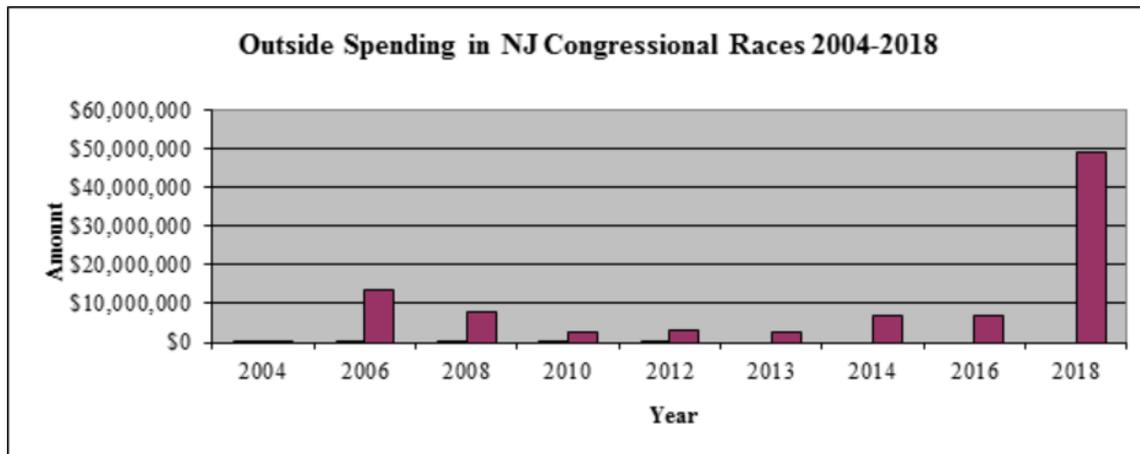
John Adams, in a letter to H. Niles, editor and publisher of a national news magazine, wrote “The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.”

The importance of the war against Dark Money has not yet jelled in the minds and hearts of most New Jerseyans. Despite the growing influence of independent groups over New Jersey elections, the public is still indifferent to the dangers posed by these often anonymous groups.

Individuals and some organizations are content to fight the last war. Just as Germany and Japan are no longer enemies, in the context of the new reality of Dark Money groups, neither are political parties.

This year’s Congressional elections, which witnessed a profound increase in independent spending, showed that there is a new enemy at the gate. At \$49 million, independent groups spent their most ever, and by a wide margin.

In fact, this amount represents more spending by independent groups than in the previous Congressional contests combined (\$41 million). The largest spending in one year previously occurred in 2006, when \$13.4 million was sunk into NJ congressional elections. That is less than third of this year’s total. In 2016, just \$7.1 million was spent.



This year’s spending was largely spurred by an expensive campaign for the US Senate seat in which the candidates alone expended a combined \$42 million and outside groups waged \$19.4 million. Despite all that spending, the result was status quo as incumbent Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez won reelection. The total was further escalated by several costly battles over congressional seats that ended with Democratic takeovers of seats held by four Republican incumbents.

New Jersey is becoming more and more accustomed to the overreaching influence of independent groups.

The gubernatorial and legislative elections of 2017 attracted outside group spending of \$49.7 million. Four years before, in 2013, independent group spending had climbed to \$41 million (includes ballot questions).

In both of those gubernatorial and legislative election years, outside organization expenditures dwarfed spending by state and county party entities.

What is more, independent spending is on the rise at the local level of politics as well, transforming New Jersey’s electoral landscape from top to bottom.

The increasing dominance of outside group spending over the state’s elections has not yet entered the public’s consciousness. That’s why the Legislature, Paul Revere-like, should awaken the public to this threat by passing legislation that would both offset the influence of independent groups and strengthen political parties.

Two pieces of legislation S-1500 (D-Singleton), [Companion A-1524 D-Zwicker] and [Text Wrapping Break]S-1479 (D-Singleton) [Companion A-3462 D-Zwicker], taken together, would accomplish those goals.

The bills incorporate proposals of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC), which require registration and disclosure of independent groups. They also strengthen political parties by allowing county organizations to give to each other, raising contribution limits, and removing political parties from pay-to-play while including PACs in the law.

Certainly, political parties are not a panacea. Yet, they are much better than the alternative. Political parties are accountable under the law, disclose their contributions and expenditures, are subject to contribution limits, organize government, are a guide to voting, and link the people to their government.

None of the above can be said of independent groups.

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.