



INSIDER NJ

Public Funding Program for Gubernatorial Campaigns Continues to Prove its Worth

JEFF BRINDLE | December 13, 2021, 11:35 am | [Edward Edwards](#)

This year's gubernatorial election was a testament to the importance and durability of New Jersey's Gubernatorial Public Financing Program.

As the general election unfolded, independent, so-called "Dark Money" groups, were spending upwards of \$40 million in support or opposition of the two major party candidates, Democratic Governor Phil Murphy and Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli.

Not only were the Republican and Democratic Governor's Association's spending heavily in this contest but so were fourteen other groups hitting the election bag hard on behalf of their candidate.

These groups had every constitutional right to participate in the gubernatorial campaign. However, unless they specifically called for supporting or opposing one or the other candidate, they had no obligation under the law to disclose their contributors or their expenditures.

So, for all intents and purposes, a single group could ostensibly spend a billion dollars in an attempt to influence the outcome of the election. And voters wouldn't be the wiser.

While this was not the case in this election, the possibility is not far-fetched as wealthy individuals have been the sole financial backers of groups participating in elections elsewhere in the country.

This all points to the continuing importance of the state's Gubernatorial Public Financing Program. While some might argue the opposite, the fact that the program provides matching funds to qualified candidates at least allows the candidates themselves to be heard rather than having their voices completely drowned out by these groups that supposedly speak on their behalf.

Through funding provided by the Gubernatorial Public Financing Program, combined with money the candidates raised themselves, both the Governor and his challenger Jack Ciattarelli were able to communicate their own messages to the voters. Their messages were heard despite the overwhelming spending undertaken by independent groups.

The Gubernatorial Public Financing Program was first introduced to the public in the general election of 1977 when incumbent Governor Brendan Byrne faced Republican, and former Senate President, Ray Bateman.

The program, which was enacted in 1973 in the wake of Watergate, was expanded to include the primary election in 1981.

The twin goals of the program, consistently upheld since its inception, are to allow candidates of limited financial means to run for governor and to eliminate undue influence from the electoral process.

This year's election bore out the first objective while throughout the eleven gubernatorial election cycles held since 1977, the second objective continued to be met as elections for governor have been free of corruption and undue influence.

Candidates qualifying for public financing are matched two public dollars for every one dollar they raise privately. To receive public funds, candidates must raise a qualifying threshold amount in private dollars and agree to participate in two interactive debates. In the general election, lieutenant governor candidates are required to participate in one debate.

The qualifying threshold is adjusted every four years by a special campaign inflation index. So too are other thresholds and limits adjusted for inflation as well.

This year's qualifying threshold was \$490,000 for the primary and \$490,000 for the general election. A total of four candidates qualified for matching funds in those elections, two in the primary and two in the general election.

Personally, and this is not a recommendation of the Commission, it seems to me the qualifying threshold has gotten too high, perhaps undercutting the goal of permitting qualified individuals of limited means to run for governor.

A qualifying threshold is indeed necessary as it does ensure that those who qualify for the program are credible candidates in that they are able to raise ample funds. In addition, a

qualifying threshold does ensure that taxpayers' money is being managed responsibly. But a threshold that is too high and will be adjusted higher in 2025 may in the long run undermine the program.

The program contains contribution limits, a public funds cap (\$10.5 million in 2021 general election), and an expenditure limit. These limits are adjusted for inflation every four years, an adjustment that keeps the program relevant, and may well serve to uphold its continuing constitutionality.

During the 2021 gubernatorial campaign, Ciattarelli received \$15.1 million in public funds, the maximum available for the two elections (\$4.6 million primary and \$10.5 million general). Murphy received \$500,000 less- \$14.6 million- because he didn't seek the full match during the primary. The total for the two candidates- \$29.7 million.

As of October 29, 2021, Murphy had spent \$24.1 million on both elections while Ciattarelli spent \$22.9 million. Public funds paid for 60 percent of Murphy's spending and 66 percent of Ciattarelli's.

Public Funds as a Percent of Total Spending by 2021 Gubernatorial Candidates

Candidate	Party	Primary Spending	General Spending	Total Spending Both Elections	Public Funds	% Public
Murphy, Phil	D	\$7,752,229	\$16,393,069	\$24,145,298	\$14,600,000	60%
Ciattarelli, Jack	R	\$7,054,692	\$15,828,691	\$22,883,383	\$15,100,000	66%

With the help of the Gubernatorial Public Financing Program the election for governor was both competitive and free of corruption.

Since its inception in 1977, 80 candidates have benefitted from this nationally recognized matching fund program. Since that first election more than four decades ago, a total of \$166 million in public funds have been distributed to participating candidates.

While the program has consistently assured the public that their gubernatorial elections are fair and free of undue influence it has done so in public dollars that amount to just under \$6 per vote, or the cost of deli sandwich.

The program has enabled three Republicans and four Democrats to win the office of Governor, and, in some cases, helped them win reelection.

Thirty-nine Republican candidates have received \$92 million, 38 Democrats have obtained \$72 million and three independents have been awarded \$2 million through the program.

With millions of dollars spent in modern day campaigns, many by independent groups, a program that assures that the candidates themselves will be heard over the cacophony of discordant voices in campaigns, and for a few dollars per voter, is well worth celebrating and promoting.

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.