



NEWS RELEASE

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Kean Decries Influence of “Dark Money” on Elections

Former Republican Governor Tom Kean Sr. says special interest groups that try to secretly influence national, state and local elections damage democracy and called for stronger disclosure laws to reduce the threat they pose.

“I don’t mind people giving what they want to give. But I want to know who gave it and why,” said the ex-governor during the fourth interview conducted as part of an ongoing project entitled “History of the NJ Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC).” Interviews can be viewed on ELEC’s website.

Kean, the state’s 48th governor, served two terms from January 1982 to January 1990. He previously had served in the state Assembly between 1968 and 1978, including two years as Assembly Speaker.

After leaving office in January 1990, he became president of Drew University where he served for 15 years. Kean gained national attention when President George W. Bush named him in December 2002 as chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, also known as the 9-11 Commission.

During the time when he held elected office, most spending on campaigns was done directly by candidates, parties and traditional political action committees. These groups were subject to disclosure requirements and since 1993 contribution limits that provided voters with full information about their activities.

In 2000, however, independent special interest groups that often operated secretly were starting to have an impact on federal elections. Kean was a first-hand witness when his son, Tom Kean Jr., ran unsuccessfully for a Congressional seat (Kean Jr. went on to become state Senate Minority Leader).

During the 2000 election, the younger Kean faced political attacks from two so-called “dark money” groups that file no reports with the Federal Election Commission. He later filed a lawsuit that prompted a FEC investigation that eventually forced the groups to detail their expenditures and to pay a \$5,500 fine.

The nastiness of the 2000 Congressional primaries prompted a public hearing at which former Governor Kean was sharply critical of these groups, calling them “termites getting at the roots of democracy.”

“I don’t believe there’s a place in democracy for people who hide in the dark...If someone wants to attack you, if someone wants to attack me, that’s fine. Sign your name,” he said.

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Opensecrets.org has estimated that at least \$1.1 billion was spent on federal elections between 2010 and 2020 without any disclosure about the source of the money. Millions also have been spent in recent years on New Jersey elections with little or no information about the donors behind the spending or even details of their spending.

ELEC for more than a decade has been calling on the Legislature to enact stronger disclosure laws that would make independent groups follow the same rules as candidates, parties and conventional PACs.

During his recent interview with ELEC Executive Jeff Brindle, Kean said he feels “more strongly” now about the need for such laws because “it hasn’t gotten better, its worse.”

“...If you are trying to buy my state legislator, I want you to come out and say, ‘I’m trying to buy the legislator’ so everybody knows where the money came from. And if that legislator is successful and then votes that way against the public interest, you know that too,” Kean said.

“Until you know who they are, you'll never know why they're doing it. And that's very important. Democracy, you know, is fragile and you've got to take care of it. And we're not taking care of it the way we should, particularly with this dark money. It's an abomination, it really is,” he said.

On a more personal note, Kean acknowledged he always dreaded making fund-raising calls despite prodding by his campaign managers.

“I can do it for other people. I can particularly do it for causes if it is something I really believe in, you know, money to feed hungry children.” But when it came to his own campaigns, “I just didn’t like to do it.”

Brindle, who conducts the interviews, said the History of the Commission project is focused on individuals who have played a significant role in enacting or enforcing the campaign finance and lobbying laws that shape ELEC’s mission.

“These video-taped interviews hopefully will serve as a resource for policy-makers, academics, media members and any interested members of the general public. Hopefully, it will add historical perspective to many of issues that have had an impact on New Jersey’s elections and its government,” he said.

Previous interviews included current ELEC Chairman Eric Jaso, former ELEC Executive Director Lewis Thurston, and former Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts.

The interviews can be viewed at: https://www.elec.nj.gov/aboutelec/ELEC_OralHistory.htm.

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