N.J.’s Gubernatorial Public Financing Program shows integrity

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COMMENTARY

Advocates of public financing might look to January 26 as Paul Revere day.

Along party lines, by a vote of 239-160, the House of Representatives voted to abolish the Presidential Public Financing Program.

The effort to dismantle the program is not supported in the Senate or at the White House. So the program is not in any immediate danger.

But the fact that a majority in the House voted to eliminate the program should serve as a rallying cry for defenders of public financing, whether in Washington or throughout the states.

The presidential program has existed since 1976. Until President Obama decided not to take public money in 2008, all general election candidates of both major parties participated.

Candidates and the public have benefited from the program. The program has permitted candidates to communicate their positions to voters and has helped thwart the influence of special interests.

25 states have public financing programs. These efforts include both matching and grant programs that provide funding to candidates and parties.

New Jersey’s program stands out. It is often mentioned among the best of state run public financing efforts. A pillar of the state’s election process, the ninth go-around of the Gubernatorial Public Financing Program was completed in 2009.

New Jersey’s matching program went into effect in 1977, on the heels of the Watergate scandal. Initially the program included only the general election. Since 1981, it has been an important part of both primary and general elections.

67 primary and general election candidates for governor participated in the program. Over the span of 32 years, candidates received approximately $105.6 million in public funds, all of which contributed to an atmosphere of trust in the integrity of New Jersey’s gubernatorial elections.

During the 2009 election, for instance, there were 5,223,047 registered voters in New Jersey. In the general election two candidates, now–Governor Chris Christie and independent candidate Chris Daggett, received $8,418,866 in public funds.

The price paid for a fair and clean election was $1.61 per voter – less than a medium cup of coffee at Dunkin Donuts.

The Campaign Contributions and Expenditure Reporting Act established the Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC), which would be the administrator of the Public Financing Program. It was signed into law by Governor William J. Cahill in 1973, a Republican.

Shortly thereafter, in amending the law, the gubernatorial program was enacted in 1974 under newly elected Governor Brendan T. Byrne, a Democrat.

Thus the seeds of bi-partisanship were immediately planted, with both governors contributing to the program’s birth. The results also have been bi-partisan – three Democratic and three Republican candidates have won the governor’s seat under the program.

The program was designed with two goals in mind: to eliminate undue influence from the gubernatorial campaigns and to permit candidates of limited means to run for the State’s highest office.

Those crafting the program saw the wisdom of including a test of “candidate viability.” They did so by including a qualification threshold to insure that the public’s money was spent wisely.

Moreover, they created a 2/1 matching ratio of public-to-private dollars in order to insure that candidates would receive an adequate amount of money to conduct effective campaigns. The program also requires candidates to raise one third of their funds from private sources to ensure that they have wide public support.

And caps limiting the amount of public money dispersed per candidate insured that spending would not escalate to the point that the State budget could not underwrite its cost.

The program also includes contribution and expenditure limits. These limits, adjusted for inflation, keep the program viable and engender trust in government.

Finally, each candidate that receives public funds is required to participate in two public financing debates. This provision furthers the effort to bring about an informed electorate.

The program has met its twin goals. In the 32 years since the program began there has never been a hint of scandal or suggestion of undue influence over the candidates.

In terms of permitting qualified candidates of limited means to run for the State's highest office, there is no better testament than the most recent gubernatorial election.

During the 2009 campaign, incumbent Governor Jon Corzine, who did not take public financing, spent $27.4 million to challenger Christie's $11.7 million.

As everyone knows, Mr. Christie is now Governor.

Other examples make the point as well. Independent Candidate Chris Daggett, in 2009, and Libertarian candidate Murray Sabrin, in 1997, both received public funds and ran credible campaigns. Public funding helped Republican Christie Whitman defeat incumbent Democrat Jim Florio in 1993. Then, it enabled Democratic Jim McGreevey to nearly defeat Whitman in 1997. So it also has made gubernatorial races competitive.

The Gubernatorial Public Financing Program is an integral part of New Jersey's electoral system and important to its integrity.

This unique program is partially supported by a tax check-off that does not add to a taxpayer's tax or reduce their refund. It is hoped that during this tax season New Jersey tax payers will continue to support this valuable program.

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The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.