Decreased campaign fundraising in N.J. shows importance of reforms

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COMMENTARY

Fundraising by county party committees is down by 37 percent from four years ago. This decrease highlights the role that reform plays in transforming the electoral landscape.

Over three decades the influence of county party committees has taken an uneven path. From practically disappearing in the 1980s, to dominance in the 1990s, their influence is on the wane again.

These changes can be traced to reforms of New Jersey's campaign finance laws.

Historically, county party organizations were the stuff of legend. Hudson County boss Frank Hague and Atlantic County's Nucky Johnson and Frank "Hap" Farley set the standard for strong county leaders. Lewis "Luke" Gray is a legend in Somerset County.

The county organizations dominated politics (and government) until the 1960s, when several developments combined to alter the power arrangements within the state and weaken the parties.

In the 1950s, party loyalty began to decline. With weaker party identification voter turnout sunk. Suburbanization and reapportionment decisions in the 60s and 70s contributed to the decline in county party influence.

Prior to these decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court, legislative districts were drawn on the basis of county borders. After that, they weren't. It was a major blow to county parties.

The Great Society programs of the 1970s helped to further undermine many traditional roles played by parties. Various reforms of election law contributed to the weakened county party system as well. Beside the 1973 Campaign Contributions and Expenditures Disclosure Act, two reforms stand out as leading the system to its lowest point in the mid to late 1980s: the Gubernatorial Public Financing Program of 1977 and the Open Primary Law of 1981.

With public financing, candidates no longer relied on the parties for money. Thus governors owed less to county leaders when in office. Moreover, the Open Primary Law removed another area of influence in both gubernatorial and non-gubernatorial elections. Parties could no longer endorse candidates in the primary, give them the party line, and were generally out of the nominating process.

Matters began to change, however, as the 1980s drew to a close.

In February 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court, in Eu v. San Francisco County Democratic Central Committee, held that the prohibition on primary endorsements violated the First and 14th Amendments. This decision impacted New Jersey's law. Now county parties could again endorse candidates in a primary.

What really turned matters around, though, were the 1993 campaign finance reforms.

These reforms, the brainchild of the Rosenthal Commission, allowed county parties to accept much larger contributions than individual candidate committees and permitted parties to spend unlimited amounts on their candidates.

The strengthened role of county party committees became almost immediately evident through their fundraising. Between 1992 and 2002, county party organizations increased their fundraising by 330 percent, $5 million to $21.5 million. They increased spending by 342 percent, from $4.7 million to $20.8 million.

Perhaps most telling, however, of the enhanced power of county organizations was the Democratic primary of 1997. Most pundits predicted Congressman Rob Andrews to win the nomination because of his congressional base. In the end, it was James McGreevey who was victorious because he had garnered the support of a majority of increasingly powerful county organizations.

The status of the county party system shifted again in 2006. In June 2004, the pay-to-play reform measure was enacted, effective the first of the year 2006.

Since then there has been a steady decrease in financial activity by county party organizations. As noted, fundraising dropped by 37 percent from 2007, the last time both the Assembly and State Senate were up for election. Through September 30, 2007 the county organizations raised $7.7 million compared with $4.8 million this year. These figures are similar to those reported in 2010, when the county organizations raised $4.4 million.

It hasn't helped that counties no longer are receiving funds from former Gov. Jon Corzine. Over the past decade, he gave his fellow Democrats $4.3 million.

In both years fundraising is comparable to financial activity reported by county party committees in years prior to the reforms of 1993, indicating that their once dominant role is again weakening.

So the lesson in all this is that we should never underestimate the importance of reform in reshaping the electoral landscape. Historical patterns that seem set can be altered by the swipe of a pen. Sometimes for the good, but sometimes for the bad, even leading to unintended consequences.

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