

Op Ed:

Stronger Local Parties, Stronger Local Government

Why New Jersey's party system needs a refresher

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Strengthening political parties will broaden the influence of municipal officials over policies adopted by State government.

Many good reasons exist for resurrecting New Jersey's weakened party system. None are more important than enhancing the say local officials have over top-down decisions that affect their communities.

To most, "home rule" is a thing of the past. Bringing back the parties may restore a semblance of that tradition.

Having stronger political parties locally will give greater voice to municipal officials as they advocate for their communities.

Legislators and other State officials would come to depend more on municipal and county party leadership for support. With greater accountability to local political parties, officials elected to serve in State government would be more receptive to designing policies that would loosen State mandates and regulatory control over local governments.

Local government first

Thomas Jefferson maintained "local government first, State government second, national government third." Though there is a no returning to the 18th century, strengthening parties may help bring those relationships back into balance.

More say-so by municipal officials over their own affairs will benefit the public in numerous ways, not the least of which is maintaining control of spending and property taxes.

This is not to say that State government does not have a role to play in ensuring that municipalities function properly, particularly financially.

Yet, allowing municipalities to be freed from State mandates and regulations may foster creativity and enhance democracy locally. A stronger political party system that involves local parties can help bring this about.

Unfortunately, recent years have witnessed a serious dismantlement of the State's political party system. In its place has emerged a trend toward independent, outside group involvement that is threatening the very existence of political parties.

The decline of parties

The trend began at the national level following the 2002 enactment of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), known as McCain-Feingold, and accelerated due to U.S. Supreme Court rulings that ended restrictions on independent spending by corporations, unions and non-profits.

While federal trends have contributed to the demise of parties in New Jersey, the State's maze of Pay-to-Play restrictions has served as the main culprit in the decline of these historic institutions.

Pay-to-Play, while well meaning, directly weakened political parties by ending all but token contributions from what had traditionally been a major source: public contractors.

It also spurred the growth of special interest political action committees (PACs) and independent groups since many of those same public contractors ended up shifting contributions to these less accountable groups.

Independent groups now dominate elections in New Jersey. During the 2017 gubernatorial and legislative elections, outside groups spent more than triple the expenditures of the two state parties and four legislative leadership committees—\$47.5 million compared with \$13.3 million.

Just 10 years earlier, those same "Big Six" committees spent 42 times more than outside groups.

The erosion of political parties and rise of outside groups was not limited to the State party entities, however. County and municipal party organizations have been victimized by the growth of independent groups as well.

Aided by special election-year funding by groups like the Democratic Governor’s Association (DGA), county organizations spent \$14.1 million last year. But that sum still was nearly half the \$27 million spent in 2003.

Municipal party committees were not spared either. In 2017, municipal party committees throughout New Jersey spent approximately \$4.4 million—half the spending of 10 years earlier.

Even as local party coffers have declined, outside group spending has filtered down to county and municipal elections, even to school board contests.

For example, in 2013, Committee for Economic Growth and Justice, a Super PAC, spent \$176,116 on the Elizabeth school board race. That same year Better Education for New Jersey Kids expended \$251,629 in Jersey City’s mayoralty contest.

In 2014, a total of \$5.5 million was spent by independent groups in the Newark mayoralty race. The largest independent group in that race, Newark First, spent \$4.5 million versus the \$2.2 million expended by the candidate it supported. Outside group activity also occurred in Trenton’s mayoral contest that year.

In 2015, a Washington, D.C.-based Super PAC even involved itself in Parsippany’s primary election.

Directing the money

Without change, single issue, special interest groups will not only overwhelm State, county, and municipal parties, but the campaigns of candidates themselves. As this is happening, influence by these groups grows over policy decisions made by elected officials statewide and locally.

For years, well-intentioned reformers have been trying to reduce the amount of money in politics. But these efforts are to no avail. Money somehow always finds its way into the political game. What is important is to direct the money toward areas of the most accountability. This can be accomplished through an electoral system that favors parties and candidates, not independent groups.

The importance of parties

To be sure, political parties may not be a panacea for good government. But they are better than the alternative,

which leaves independent, often anonymous groups controlling election outcomes, and therefore government.

Political parties are accountable, highly regulated under New Jersey statutes, disclose all their financial activities, and, importantly, provide a guide to voting.

Throughout the nation’s history they have been an integral part of our civil society by serving as a link between families and the government. Critically, they organize government at all levels, including executive, legislative, and judicial functions.

Political parties play a role in organizing City Hall, Governor’s offices, and the White House. Borough Councils, Township Committees, State Legislatures, and Congress all are structured on the

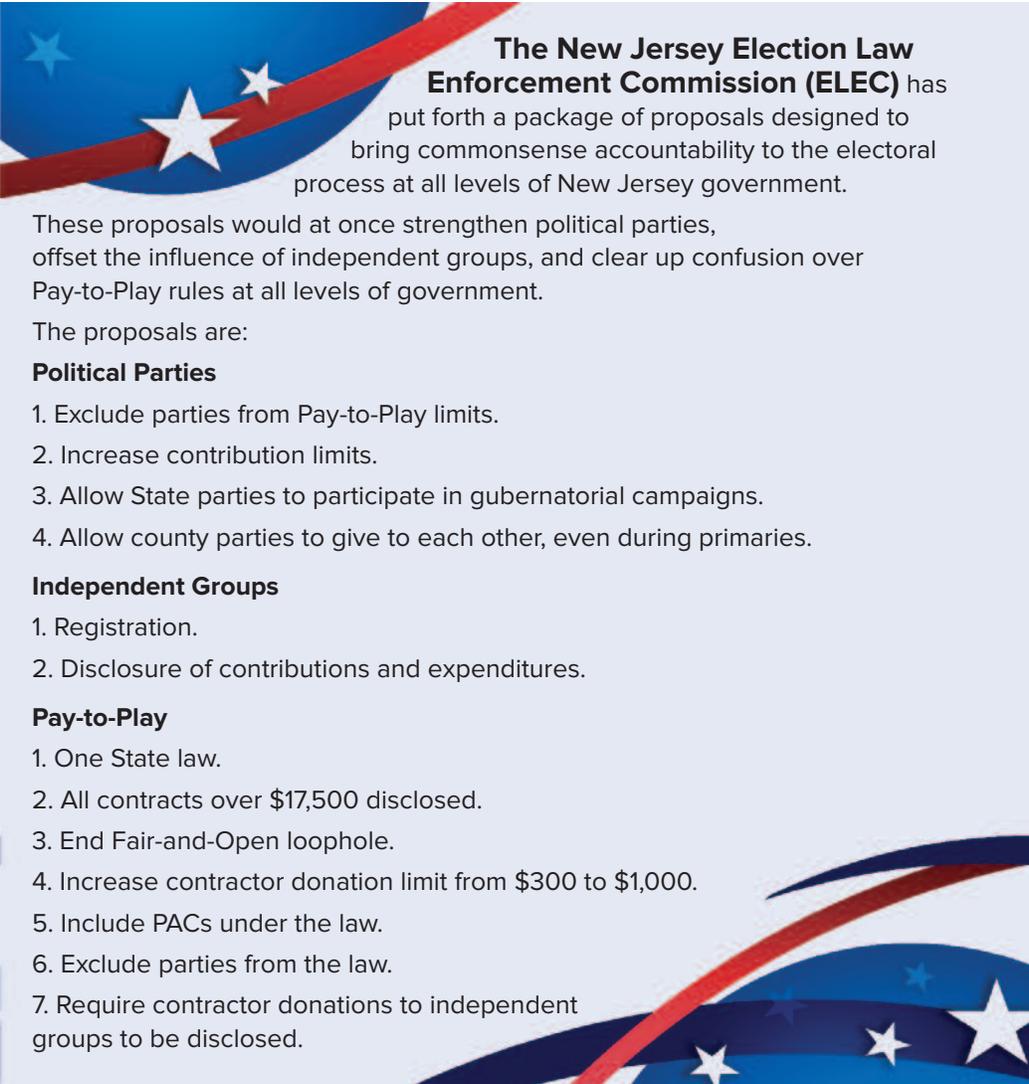
basis of party. Even municipal, State, and federal courts are filled with judges directly or indirectly connected with political parties.

Reversing the decline in political parties may have a bonus: boosting voter turnout.

Turnout in 1993 statewide elections was 65%. Political parties spent \$47 million that year, while spending by independent groups was minimal.

Turnout in 2017 elections was just 36%. Was it a coincidence that independent groups outspent parties \$48 million to \$26 million?

Strong municipal governments, directly responsible to local citizens, are essential to the overall well-being of the State. Strong municipal parties are a critical component of that paradigm. 🗳️



The New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) has put forth a package of proposals designed to bring commonsense accountability to the electoral process at all levels of New Jersey government.

These proposals would at once strengthen political parties, offset the influence of independent groups, and clear up confusion over Pay-to-Play rules at all levels of government.

The proposals are:

Political Parties

1. Exclude parties from Pay-to-Play limits.
2. Increase contribution limits.
3. Allow State parties to participate in gubernatorial campaigns.
4. Allow county parties to give to each other, even during primaries.

Independent Groups

1. Registration.
2. Disclosure of contributions and expenditures.

Pay-to-Play

1. One State law.
2. All contracts over \$17,500 disclosed.
3. End Fair-and-Open loophole.
4. Increase contractor donation limit from \$300 to \$1,000.
5. Include PACs under the law.
6. Exclude parties from the law.
7. Require contractor donations to independent groups to be disclosed.