



NEWS RELEASE

Respond to:
P.O. Box 185
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0185
(609) 292-8700

CONTACT: JEFFREY M. BRINDLE
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

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Spending in New Jersey's school board elections increased by 230 percent between 1990 and 2000, according to Jeffrey M. Brindle, Deputy Director of the State's Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The findings are contained in the Commission's most recent White Paper, entitled School Board Campaign Financing, which also noted that contributions to these candidates rose by 159 percent during this period.

In 1990, spending reached \$218,736 and contribution activity \$279,000. Ten years later in 2000, spending rose to \$722,412 and receipts to \$724,493.

Brindle said that "when comparing the rate of increase in financial activity to that of other types of candidates during similar time periods, the percentage increase in financial activity in school board elections is quite remarkable."

"For Example," said Brindle, "between 1987 and 1997, legislative candidates increased their expenditures by 60 percent and their fund raising by 61 percent. These percentages are quite a bit less than those of school board candidates."

Over the last several years the Commission has analyzed campaign financing at the local level of politics. In Repartyization: The Rebirth of County Organizations, published in 1997, in Local Campaign Financing, published in 2000, and now in its study of school board elections, the Commission has documented significant increases in campaign financial activity at the county and municipal levels.

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While providing an overview of school board campaign financing in general, the study undertakes an in-depth analysis of financial activity in the top ten spending campaigns in 1990, 1995, and 2000.

“One of the most interesting aspects of the study involves the noticeable increase in partisan involvement in these elections since 1990,” said Brindle. “Tradition holds that school board elections in New Jersey are non-partisan events, but the data suggests that this situation may be changing.”

Brindle added that contributions from political parties, other types of candidates, and political committees totaled 19 percent of all receipts reported during the three years studied.

“More significantly,” said Brindle, “while contributions derived from partisan entities amounted to just six percent of total in 1990, the percentage stemming from these entities rose consistently through the years, amounting to 35 percent of all contributions in 2000.”

Brindle said that the proportion of school board candidate receipts derived from party entities in 2000 was second only to individual donors; who made 39 percent of contributions.

The study also analyzed spending patterns in school board contests, discerning similar spending decisions to those of other local candidates.

“Over the three elections studied,” continued Brindle, “approximately 72 percent of expenditures went toward mass communication, with the bulk of those expenditures, 79 percent directed toward print advertising.” He said that 40 percent of print advertising expenditures went for direct mail and 34 percent for newspaper advertisements.

In addition to analyzing financial activity of school board candidates, the study also looks at budget approval rates and voter turnout in school board contests. It also discusses state funding of school districts. The study finds that during the ten-year period, budget approval rates increased as voter turnout declined, allowing partisan and other interest groups to enhance their influence in these elections.

Copies of this report can be obtained by contacting the Commission at (609) 292-8700 or by visiting ELEC’s web site at <http://www.elec.state.nj.us/>.