

FOR POLICY WONKS ONLY

Review and Analysis of Policy Studies, Newspaper Reports
and Journal Articles about New Jersey Issues

Reviewed by Lauren Otis

School Board Campaign Financing

By Jeffrey M. Brindle

New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission Trenton

School board elections would seem to be about as grass roots as democratic politics can be. Board members' work is local, easily understood, and important. After all, their ultimate responsibility is for the education of our children. Even if members of a community can't seem to get themselves interested in the white noise of national, state or county campaigns they certainly aren't going to ignore their own school board elections, with those they elect making important decisions affecting educational standards, local property taxes, and indirectly, property values. Right?

Wrong.

School board elections are chronic sufferers from voter apathy. Even in a nation of increasingly anemic turnouts on election day, school board elections—which often take place separately from partisan races—take the cake. This apathy has been exploited in the past, such as by far right Christian groups who gained a political toehold in some states by running slates of “stealth” candidates in school board elections. Now a white paper by the Election Law Enforcement Commission states that in recent years the role of money, partisanship and special interests has increased significantly in New Jersey school board campaigns, all while voter turnout

for such races continued to shrink.

The white paper, written by ELEC Deputy Director Jeffrey M. Brindle, actually came out last April but received little attention. This is a shame because education and school governance are big issues in New Jersey. With all but 18 of New Jersey's 615 school districts electing their school boards, it is inconceivable that any person would credibly weigh in on statewide education standards and reform who does not have a thorough understanding of the current dysfunctional state of local school board elections, and has not read this report.

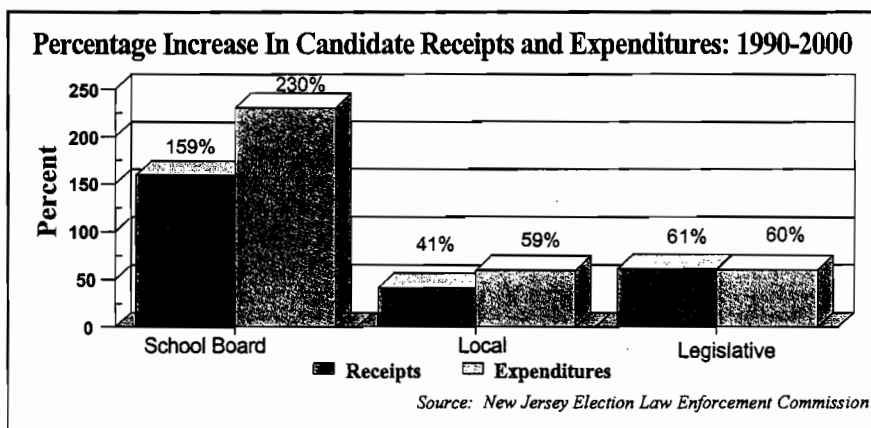
ELEC's examination found that spending by candidates in New Jersey school board elections increased by 230 percent, and campaign contributions rose 159 percent, between 1990 and 2000. Although the total amount of spending and contributions was miniscule compared to the millions of dollars raised and spent in other higher profile campaigns—total spending was \$218,736 in 1990 and \$722,412 in

2000, contributions were \$279,332 in 1990 and \$724,493 in 2000—the jump in percentage terms is huge. By comparison, between 1987 and 1997, legislative campaign expenditures and fund raising increased by only 60 percent and 61 percent respectively, according to ELEC.

The ELEC white paper begins by looking at the issue of low voter turnout. “In 1996, 18 percent of registered voters cast ballots in school board elections throughout the State. Since that time, turnout has consistently dropped, measuring just 13 percent in 2001,” according to the white paper. “As evidenced by continued low voter turnout, the general public has yet to awaken to the importance of these elections or to the impact of school board policy on local government,” it reads, adding “It is one of the enduring questions of electoral politics in New Jersey as to why an election of such import meets with apathy on the part of the general public.”

The ELEC report raises the alarm that as voter turnout decreases in school board elections, and interest group participation increases, these groups are increasingly able to sway election outcomes. “It is not in the interest of the community to have any one group hold a disproportionate influence over the outcome of these contests,” the report states.

Looking at the top ten school board contests in terms of financial activity in 1990, 1995, and 2000,



ELEC found “the bulk of contributions to school board candidates derived from unions,” specifically those affiliated with the New Jersey Education Association. Although union contributions fluctuated over time, they averaged 40 percent of total receipts. Individual and business contributions, which averaged 26 percent and 13 percent respectively, decreasing as a percentage of total receipts over the 1990s. But partisan group contributions — including from political parties, candidates from other campaigns and political committees—increased

over time as a percentage of total receipts, accounting for only four percent of total contributions in 1990 and 35 percent in 2000 (averaging 19 percent of total contributions for the 1990s as a whole).

Traditionally nonpartisan school board elections “may be getting more partisan in nature in light of the increasing proportion of contributions stemming from partisan groups,” notes the ELEC report. The ELEC white paper attempts little interpretation and makes no judgments about whether such change is a good thing. But it does bemoan the

low voter turnouts for school board elections in New Jersey and notes that the white paper is intended as a first shot across the bow on the issue, with further, more in-depth studies and greater public awareness (and voter participation) hopefully following on its own efforts. It is a worthy goal and this white paper is a worthy start.

(The full ELEC school board campaign finance white paper can be obtained at ELEC's website at <http://www.elec.state.nj.us/>.)



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