

WANING PARTIES ACROSS THE POND- WARNING SIGN FOR US AND NJ?

BY JEFF BRINDLE

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The political party system in Great Britain is showing signs of decline.

According to New Statesman “In 1951, 97 percent of the electorate voted for one of the two main parties in Britain. By 2010, this had fallen to 65 percent – and according to a new poll . . . just 59 percent of those who vote in May’s election will opt for Conservative or Labour.”

The article states further “the Conservatives and Labour could once boast of membership over two million. Today, the figure for both is under 200,000.”

America is on the same path to party decline. Federally, and throughout the states, including New Jersey, party strength is diminishing.

A Pew Research Center study found that 76 percent of the public identified themselves as Republican or Democrat in 1939. Just 18 percent considered themselves independent.

In 2012, only 56 percent were identifying themselves as Republican or Democrat, while 38 percent viewed themselves as independent.

The reasons for the weakening party systems differ between Britain and America.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, in devolving power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, along with his support for proportional representation in European elections, created conditions favorable to the emergence of third parties.

Economic and social problems contributed as well.

In America, changes in political culture brought about an era of single-issue politics, which contributed to party decline.

Recently, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), or McCain/Feingold, and then Citizens United, facilitated party decline by ushering in a period of sustained growth in independent groups.

Independent spending, though at a modest level, began shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Buckley v. Valeo, 1976. That ruling allowed unlimited spending by wealthy individuals as long as it was independent.

The surge in independent spending, however, resulted from the McCain/Feingold reforms, which eliminated unlimited soft money contributions to parties, thereby redirecting money to independent groups.

Citizens United, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2010, lifted a ban on corporate and labor independent spending. By doing so, it furthered the trend ignited by McCain Feingold.

Between 2002 and 2008, two years prior to Citizens United, and following McCain/Feingold, independent spending grew by over 1,000 percent.

After Citizens United, and the emergence of Super PACs, independent groups, in many instances sponsored by wealthy individuals, spent more than \$1.7 billion nationally.

This trend did not by-pass New Jersey. As in other states, independent spending soared in the Garden State.

During the 2013 gubernatorial and legislative elections over \$41 million was spent by outside groups.

The trend continued this year, but at the local level. In the Newark and Trenton Mayoralty elections in May, about \$5.6 was spent independently, mostly in Newark.

Two weeks ago, a super PAC spent an estimated \$200,000 just on school board elections in Elizabeth.

The presence of independent groups is overwhelming political parties, as evidenced by independent groups spending about three times as much as state party entities in 2013.

In the Newark contest outside groups spent nearly as much as all candidates and political committees combined.

Further evidence is seen by the decrease in fundraising by political parties at all levels over the last decade.

There is not much that New Jersey elected officials can do about party decline internationally or nationally. But, political parties can be revived in New Jersey.

As indicated in an earlier column, the prohibition on state parties participating in gubernatorial elections should be lifted.

Allowing parties to get involved in gubernatorial elections will shift contributions back to groups that are most accountable.

Moreover, public contractors should be permitted to contribute up to \$25,000 per year to political parties. At the same time, stringent limits should be applied to public contractor donations to political action committees (PACs).

Independent groups should be required to register in New Jersey and disclose their contributors and expenditures – just like parties and candidates. And, public contractor donations to these groups should be highlighted in the reports, thereby enhancing transparency.

Finally, Congress should be urged to loosen the rules applicable to the federal accounts of state parties, allowing them more flexibility in the use of those funds.

These reforms would begin to redress the imbalance that now exists between independent groups and the political parties.

Political parties are highly regulated in New Jersey, represent broad coalitions of people rather than narrow interests, serve as a link between the people and their government, and organize government.

They are infinitely more accountable than often-secretive independent groups and should be strengthened.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.