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THE WELL-KEPT SECRET OF CLEAN ELECTIONS:

Voters skeptical of the legislature and public campaign financing

Voters this fall knew little about an attempt by the New Jersey state legislature to introduce public financing of Assembly races, or to reduce the influence of large donors over the legislative process, and to increase trust in state government. According to a series of polls by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind and Rutgers University's Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, 7 of 10 likely voters in the targeted assembly districts and 8 of 10 likely voters in the state heard little or nothing about the "Clean Elections" legislation.

More than two-thirds of voters in the 6th and 13th Assembly districts targeted for "Clean Elections" did not know their district was one in which the new experimental campaign finance rules applied. Indeed, voters in those two districts knew no more about the election for State Assembly than did voters elsewhere in the state. A majority -- even of likely voters -- had heard little or nothing about their local Assembly race no matter what district they were in.

Nonetheless, a majority of voters say they are very concerned that people who give money to campaigns also influence the state legislature. And only 1 in 5 voters trusts the legislature all or most of the time to do what is right, while 4 of 5 voters say they have such trust only some or none of the time.

"The Clean Elections project failed to catch voters' attention," said Tim Vercellotti of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling. "If the legislature wanted to increase public confidence in the election process and increase trust in lawmakers, it did not achieve its objective," added Peter Woolley of FDU's PublicMind.

Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind conducted surveys of 596 randomly selected likely voters statewide in late September (MoE=+/-4), and 355 in early November (MoE=+/-5). In late October, the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University polled 347 likely voters in the 6th and 13th Assembly districts, the two districts that were designated for participation in the Clean Elections pilot project (MoE=+/-5). The surveys were underwritten in part by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and by the Fund for New Jersey. The study was a joint effort of the New Jersey Academic Study Group on Clean Elections, which consisted of political science professors from a number of universities around the state.