

The Well-Kept Secret of Clean Elections

Draft Report to the New Jersey Citizens' Clean Election Commission

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Introduction

This report summarizes the results of three surveys designed to measure public attitudes about campaign finance reform in general and the Clean Elections Program in particular. Fairleigh Dickinson University, through its PublicMind Poll, conducted two statewide surveys of voters in late September and early November. In late October the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University polled voters in the 6th and 13th Assembly districts, the two districts that were designated for participation in the Clean Elections pilot project.

The Fairleigh Dickinson surveys were designed to measure changes in awareness of the Clean Elections program, as well as attitudes about public financing of legislative campaigns, from late September to early November. The aim of the Eagleton survey was to measure whether awareness of the Clean Elections pilot project was higher in the targeted districts than in the rest of the state, and whether attitudes about public financing of legislative campaigns differed in the targeted districts compared to the rest of the state.

Statewide Surveys

Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind conducted two statewide voter surveys in New Jersey, posing a series of 10 questions related to the state's experimental Clean Elections legislation. The surveys intended to measure voters' knowledge of the legislation as well as their involvement in and attitudes towards the Assembly races in the district where they live. The surveys also intended to measure any changes in voter attitudes over the course of the fall campaign. Both surveys were conducted by telephone using random-digit dialing (RDD). The first of the surveys was conducted from September 21 through September 26 with a randomly selected sample of 596 likely voters statewide. The second, a follow-up survey, was conducted from October 28 to Nov. 2 with a randomly selected sample of 355 likely voters. Both surveys were meant to serve as a baseline, or control, against the survey conducted in the two Assembly districts to which the experimental legislation applied. The costs of the two surveys were underwritten in part by the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and in part by Fairleigh Dickinson University.

September Statewide Survey

Topline results for the September survey were:

- Three of four (75%) said they trust the state legislature to do what is right only some or none of the time, while only 23% said they trust the state legislature to do what is right most or all of the time.
- Only 13% said they were not at all concerned that people who give money to campaigns might also influence the legislature after the election, while 87% said they were somewhat or very concerned that campaign donors influence legislation.
- Four of five (82%) likely voters reported they heard little or nothing at all about the state's Clean Elections legislation.
- Voters were split on the question of whether public financing can reduce large donors' influence over the political process: 43% reported they were not at all confident that public financing will work while 44% said they were "somewhat" confident that public financing can work. Only 9% said they were "very" confident public financing can work, while another 5% said they didn't know.
- Four of five likely voters (80%) also reported they had heard or read little or nothing about the Assembly race in their district. Only 5% said they had heard quite a lot.
- Most people also reported that they had received no campaign advertisements by mail for their Assembly race (73%), heard no radio or TV ads (69%), saw no ads on the internet (87%), nor read any articles about the race in the newspaper (55%).
- When asked whether their local campaign for state Assembly focused more on personality or issues, more than a third (38%) could not offer an opinion.

November Statewide Survey

Results of the November survey differed little or not at all from the September survey despite respondents reporting that they had been exposed to some campaign advertising.

- Voters' natural cynicism about government persisted, with 79% saying they could trust the legislature only some or none of the time to do what is right. (In September the figure was 75%.)
- Almost 9 in 10 voters (88%) said they were somewhat or very concerned that large campaign donors influence legislation (compared to 87% in September).
- Still, four of five likely voters (79%) said they heard little or nothing at all about the new, experimental campaign finance rules (compared to 82% in September).
- As to whether they thought public financing might reduce the influence of large donors over legislation, 39% continued to say it would not (compared to 43% in September). Only 6% were "very" confident public financing would help matters (compared to 9% in September). And 49% were "somewhat" confident that public financing could help (compared to 44% in September). These changes are all within the margin of error of the studies.
- Even at this late point in the campaign, 63% of likely voters said they had heard little or nothing at all about the Assembly race in their district (compared to 80% in September).

- Half (49%) said they heard no radio or TV ads for the Assembly race in their district, while 85% said they had seen nothing about it on a Web site. But a majority (57%) said they had seen an article in the newspaper.
- When asked whether their local campaign for state Assembly focused more on personality or issues, a quarter (27%) still did not venture an opinion, but 43% said the campaign focused more on personal characteristics of the candidates and 29% said the campaign focused more on the candidates' position on issues.

Late October Survey in the Clean Elections Districts

The Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University asked the same questions of a random sample of 500 registered voters, which included a sub-sample of 347 likely voters, in the two Clean Elections pilot districts October 24 through October 31. (Although only one pair of candidates qualified for Clean Elections funding in the 6th District, and no one qualified in the 13th District, Eagleton opted to study both districts because of the publicity surrounding the initiative in both districts.) The survey was conducted by telephone and respondents were selected at random from a list of voters in each district obtained from Camden County (which encompasses the 6th District) and Middlesex and Monmouth counties (which encompass the 13th District). The sample consisted of 250 voters in each district. The sample in the 13th District was a quota sample so that the proportion of voters participating in the survey from Middlesex and Monmouth counties reflected the distribution of voters from those counties in the 13th District. The cost of the survey was underwritten in part by the Fund for New Jersey and in part by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

Topline results from the district-level survey were:¹

- Political cynicism in the district mirrored that of the statewide numbers. Seventy-seven percent of likely voters and 79% of registered voters said they could trust the state legislature to do what is right only some or none of the time.
- Eighty-nine percent of likely voters and 86% of registered voters were very or somewhat concerned that donors to campaigns might influence legislation.
- Awareness of the Clean Elections initiative was marginally higher in the Assembly districts than statewide. Twenty-nine percent of likely voters and 26% of registered voters in the districts said they had heard or read “quite a lot” or “some” about the Clean Elections legislation, compared to 20% in the statewide poll in early November.
- Although awareness of the legislation was slightly higher in the districts than statewide, more than two-thirds of likely and registered voters in the 6th and 13th districts said they did not know whether their Assembly district was one of the districts in the Clean Elections program. Twenty-three percent of likely voters in the 6th District and 18% of likely voters in the 13th District correctly answered yes, as did 20% of registered voters in the 6th District and 17% of registered voters in the 13th District.
- Forty-two percent of likely voters and 41% of registered voters in the two districts were “not confident at all” that public financing of campaigns would reduce the influence of large donors in the political process, similar to the skepticism expressed by likely voters in the statewide survey in early November. Only 8% of likely voters and 7% of registered

¹ See Appendix B for tables comparing results from the late October district-level survey to the early November statewide survey.

voters were very confident, with 44% of likely and registered voters saying they were somewhat confident.

- Awareness of the Assembly race in the districts was low, and similar to that expressed by likely voters in the early November statewide poll. Fifty-eight percent of likely voters and 61% of registered voters said they had heard or read just a little or nothing at all about the races.
- Information about the Assembly races was most likely to come in direct-mail advertising or newspaper articles. Sixty-percent of likely voters and 61% of registered voters said they had received campaign advertising in the mail in the previous month. Fifty-eight percent of likely voters and 55% of registered voters said they had gotten information from an article or articles in the newspaper. Forty-four percent of likely voters and 45% of registered voters had heard or seen a radio or television ad about the race, and only 8% of likely voters and 10% of registered voters had gotten information from a web site. All of the numbers were fairly close to those reported in the early November statewide survey.
- Respondents were more likely to say the campaign for Assembly seats from their district focused on the personal characteristics of the candidates, as opposed to their issue positions. Forty-five percent of likely voters and 43% of registered voters said personal characteristics, while 22 percent of likely voters and 24 percent of registered voters said issue positions. The response patterns also were similar to those from the early November statewide survey.

Conclusions

The only measure which appears to have changed significantly from the September statewide survey to the November statewide survey is the percentage of voters who had heard or read something about the Assembly race in their district. By November 36% said they had heard some or quite a lot about their Assembly race, compared to just 18% in September.

However, although the percentage of voters who had heard about their assembly race doubled from September to November, the percentage who had heard about the Clean Election legislation remained essentially unchanged at the state level. Likewise, measures of voters' trust in the legislature, as well as measures of concern about the influence of big money, were unchanged in the course of the campaign.

The attempt to measure voters' attitudes toward public financing may have been unsuccessful. It is not clear that respondents had thought much about the public financing of elections. The overall response in both statewide surveys was bland, with about half (49%) venturing that they were "somewhat" confident that public financing could help reduce the influence of large donors on the legislative process. Only 6% said they were very confident. Nearly 40% said they had no confidence public financing would work. There were no significant differences in the responses of Republicans and Democrats or in the responses of conservatives and liberals. Nor were there any differences in the responses based on race or age.

Likewise, the attempt to measure voters' perceptions of whether their Assembly campaign focused more on issues or more on the personalities of the candidates may have been unsuccessful. Most voters, even late in the race, heard or read little or nothing about the Assembly race and were, thus, unlikely to be able to judge whether the race focused more on

personalities or more on issues. Even late in the race more than a quarter of respondents did not venture an opinion on this question.

At the district level, the data suggest that the Clean Elections project had no effect on public attitudes toward public financing of campaigns or trust in government. Attitudes in those areas did not differ markedly from opinions expressed in the statewide surveys.

Awareness of the Clean Elections initiative was a little higher in the targeted districts than it was in the rest of the state, but this is not surprising given the probability that media coverage of Clean Elections was higher in the districts than elsewhere in the state. And still, the extent of public awareness, even in the targeted districts, appears to have been quite limited. While voters in the targeted districts were more likely than statewide voters to say they had heard of the Clean Elections project, more than two-thirds of voters in the targeted districts said they did not know whether their district was part of the initiative.

There is no evidence in the study to suggest that the Clean Elections legislation had any effect on voters' attitudes either statewide or in the two Assembly districts to which the legislation applied. There is no evidence, either statewide or in the two Assembly districts, that there was increased trust in the legislature, or increased interest in the Assembly races, or increased knowledge of the candidates, or optimism about the results of public financing.

Appendix A – Methodological Notes, Question Wording, and Order

The sampling error for the 596 randomly selected respondents in Fairleigh Dickinson's late September survey is +/- 4 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. The sampling error for Fairleigh Dickinson's early November survey of 355 respondents is +/- 5 percentage points. The margin of error for Rutgers University's survey of 347 likely voters is +/- 5 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence interval, and +/- 4 percentage points for the sample of 500 registered voters.

Survey results are also subject to non-sampling error. This kind of error, which cannot be measured, arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, non-response (eligible individuals refusing to be interviewed), question wording, the order in which questions are asked, and variations among interviewers.

The wording and order of the questions included in this release are as below. These were preceded by a number of voter screening questions as well as questions about the direction of the state, name recognition and attitudes towards statewide office holders or candidates for statewide office. For these questions, go to "Recent Research" at <http://publicmind.fdu.edu>.

Trust in the political process

CE1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the state legislature in Trenton to do what is right?

1. Just about always
2. Most of the time
3. Some of the time
4. None of the time
9. Don't Know/Refused (Vol)

CE2. How concerned are you that people who give money to campaigns might influence the state legislature after the election? Are you...

1. Very concerned
2. Somewhat concerned
3. Not concerned at all
9. Don't Know/Refused (Vol)

The November election / Clean Election

CE3. AS YOU MAY OR MAY NOT KNOW, the state is applying new, experimental campaign finance rules to elections in two assembly districts. How much have you heard or read about this Clean Elections legislation...?

1. Quite a lot
2. Some

3. Just a little or
4. Nothing at all
9. Don't Know/Refused (Vol)

CE4. How confident are you that public financing of campaigns will reduce the influence of large donors in the political process? Are you...

1. Very confident
2. Somewhat confident
3. Not confident at all
9. Don't Know/Refused (Vol)

Assembly race in respondent's district

CE5. And what about the Assembly race... How much have you heard or read so far about the Assembly race in the district where you live...?

1. Quite a lot
2. Some
3. Just a little or
4. Nothing at all
9. Don't Know/Refused (Vol)

Please answer yes or no to the following questions. In the past month, have you received information about your ASSEMBLY race in any of the following ways:

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know (Vol)
9. Refused (Vol)

CE6. Campaign ads in the mail

CE7. Radio or TV ads

CE8. News or advertising on an Internet web site

CE9. An article or articles in the newspaper

CE10. In general, would you say that the campaign for state ASSEMBLY where you live has focused more on [ROTATE RESPONSES 1 and 2]

1. The candidates' issue positions
2. The personal characteristics of the candidates
9. Don't Know/Refused (vol)

Demographics

D1. Regardless of who you might vote for, do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent?

Democrat
Republican
Independent [ASK: which way do you lean?]
Other [DON'T READ]
Don't Know/Ref [DON'T READ]

D2. In thinking about government and politics, do you consider yourself to be liberal, moderate, or conservative?

Liberal
Moderate [ASK: which way do you lean?]
Conservative
DK/Ref [DON'T READ]

D3. In what year were you born?

D4. Are you currently employed full time, part time, or are you retired or not employed?

FT
PT
Retired
Not employed
DK/Ref [DON'T READ]

D5. What is the highest level of education you have achieved so far?

Some HS
HS degree
Some college
College degree
Masters or above
Ref.

D6. Gender (from observation)

D7. Are you married, living as married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

D8 County code [break by region]

D9. In addition to being American, would you say you're... ?

[Prompt as necessary]

White

African-American

Asian-American

Hispanic/Latin American

Other [vol]

Ref.

Appendix B – Frequency Data

How much of the time do you think you can trust the state legislature in Trenton to do what is right?			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Just about always	1 %	1 %	1 %
Most of the time	15 %	18 %	17 %
Some of the time	68 %	65 %	63 %
None of the time	15 %	12 %	13 %
Don't know/Refused	4 %	4 %	6 %
N	355	347	500

How concerned are you that people who give money to campaigns might influence the state legislature after the election? Are you...			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Very concerned	56 %	52 %	48 %
Somewhat concerned	32 %	37 %	38 %
Not concerned at all	11 %	10 %	12 %
Don't know/Refused	1 %	1 %	3 %
N	355	347	500

As you may or may not know, the state is applying new, experimental campaign finance rules to elections in two Assembly districts. How much have you heard or read about this Clean Elections legislation?			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Quite a lot	7 %	12 %	10 %
Some	13 %	17 %	16 %
Just a little	30 %	29 %	27 %
Nothing at all	50 %	41 %	45 %
Don't know/Refused	1 %	1 %	2 %
N	355	347	500

Is your district one of the districts in which the new campaign finance rules are being applied?				
	6 th District – Likely voters (10/05)	13 th District – Likely voters (10/05)	6 th District – Registered voters (10/05)	13 th District – Registered voters (10/05)
Yes	23 %	18 %	20 %	17 %
No	8 %	14 %	7 %	15 %
Don't know	69 %	68 %	72 %	68 %
Refused	1 %	0 %	1 %	0 %
N	181	166	250	250

How confident are you that public financing of campaigns will reduce the influence of large donors in the political process? Are you...			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Very confident	6 %	8 %	7 %
Somewhat confident	49 %	44 %	44 %
Not confident at all	39 %	42 %	41 %
Don't know/Refused	5 %	6 %	8 %
N	355	347	500

And what about the Assembly race? How much have you heard or read so far about the Assembly race in the district where you live?			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Quite a lot	15 %	16 %	14 %
Some	21 %	24 %	23 %
Just a little	38 %	37 %	36 %
Nothing at all	25 %	21 %	25 %
Don't know/Refused	1 %	1 %	2 %
N	355	347	500

Please answer yes or no to the following questions. In the past month, have you received information about your Assembly race in any of the following ways:			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
Campaign ads in the mail	64 %	60 %	61 %
Radio or TV ads	49 %	44 %	45 %
News or advertising on an Internet web site	13 %	8 %	10 %
An article or articles in the newspaper	58 %	58 %	55 %
N	355	347	500

In general, would you say that the campaign for State Assembly where you live has focused more on the candidates' issue positions or the personal characteristics of the candidates?			
	Likely voters – Statewide (11/05)	Likely voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)	Registered voters – Clean Elections Districts (10/05)
The candidates' issue positions	29 %	22 %	24 %
The personal characteristics of the candidates	44 %	45 %	43 %
Don't know/Refused	28 %	33 %	33 %
N	355	347	500