



Alabama Supreme Court races ranked among nation's most expensive judicial contests

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AP By The Associated Press



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MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Alabama remains home to some of the most expensive court races in the U.S. even though overall spending was down for the 2010 elections.

Candidates in Alabama's three Supreme Court races in 2010 raised \$4.3 million. Several other states had that many seats up for election in 2010, but none matched Alabama's candidates in fundraising last year, according to a national study done by the nonpartisan Justice at Stake Campaign and other organizations.

That's no surprise. Alabama's hotly contested Supreme Court races led the nation in fundraising by candidates between 2000 and 2009 because of the big budget battles between business interests and plaintiff lawyers.

"Even in a down year, Alabama can still lead the way," said Charlie Hall, spokesman for the Justice at Stake Campaign.

What was unusual about 2010 is that spending in Alabama and some other states was less than normal.

For instance, Alabama only had one Supreme Court race in 2008 and the candidates raised \$4.3 million — the same as three races this time.

"The economy has clearly affected people's bottom lines," Hall said.

The decreased spending was seen in other races in Alabama, including the governor's race. Republican winner Robert Bentley spent \$8.1 million in 2010, compared with Republican Gov. Bob Riley's \$13.4 million in 2002 and \$12.1 million in 2006.

The effects of the economy shows up in other ways. The Alabama Civil Justice Reform Committee, a coalition of business groups that traditionally backs Republican Supreme Court candidates, filed campaign finance reports showing it spent \$1.2 million in 2010. That compared to \$1.8 million in 2006.

Hall said the economy wasn't the only issue likely affecting spending in Alabama. He said spending tends to be highest when political groups are in a heated battle to get a majority of their candidates on the court. Once a court becomes lopsided, spending tends to decline some because the losing side gets discouraged.

Republicans, mostly backed by business groups, went into the 2010 election with an 8-1 majority on the court, and they came out of the election with the same margin because GOP candidates won all three races.

One of Alabama's biggest campaign contributors, Montgomery plaintiff lawyer Jere Beasley, agreed with Hall's assessment.

"The polls showed Republicans were going to sweep it, and the Democrats couldn't raise much money. It turned out to be exactly as projected," Beasley said.

Alabama didn't get outside groups running lots of TV ads about judicial candidates like some states did in 2010. When TV ads by outside groups are considered, Michigan had the nation's most expensive Supreme Court campaigns last year, with \$2.7 million from the candidates and \$5.1 million from outside groups. That brought the total cost to \$7.8 million, Hall said.

Even using spending by outside groups, Alabama's \$4.3 million campaign total was second in the nation, Hall said.

The Justice at Stake Campaign doesn't take positions in court races, but it does raise concerns about the effect that big-budget races have on the public's perception about the impartiality of judges.

(This report was written by Phillip Rawls of The Associated Press.)

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