



Alabama judges spend far more on elections than other states in 2000-2009

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Eric Velasco -- The Birmingham News

The decade from 2000-2009 was marked by runaway spending and advertising in judicial elections nationally, with Alabama leading the pack, a new report shows.

Supreme Court candidates in Alabama spent \$41 million in that decade, more than twice the amount spent by candidates in the No. 2 state, Pennsylvania, the report, *The New Politics of Judicial Elections*, said.

Alabama's candidates also aired more ads -- 40,167 -- than those in any other state, the report found.

"Alabama's judicial politics are extreme," said the report authors, with the judicial campaign watchdogs Justice at Stake, The Brennan Center for Justice, the National Institute for Money in State Politics and Hofstra Law School.

Polls show voters believe campaign money buys favorable court rulings, the report said.

"This crisis of confidence in the judiciary is real and growing," Sandra Day O'Connor, former U.S. Supreme Court justice, wrote in a forward to the report.

Nationally, ad spending increased nearly seven-fold in the 2000s versus the 1990s, the report said.

The trend is expected to grow after this year's U.S. Supreme Court ruling killing limits on corporate and union spending in elections, the report said.

The last decade has seen the rise of what the report called "Super Spenders," groups that substantially underwrite individual judicial campaigns.

Alabama groups comprised three of the top 10 "Super Spenders" nationally identified in the report.

The Alabama Democratic Party, which poured \$5.9 million into judicial races last decade, ranked second, the report said.

Corporate-backed groups that helped fund the Republican takeover of state appellate courts ranked third and seventh nationally.

One was the Business Council of Alabama's political action committee, Progress PAC, which spent \$4.6 million on state high court races over the decade. The other, the Alabama Civil Justice Reform Committee PAC, spent \$2.7 million, the report said.

Since the 2000 election, several state Supreme Court candidates received one-third or more of their funding from these "Super Spenders," the report said.

Justice Mike Bolin, who is seeking re-election this year, got 32 percent of his funding in the 2004 campaign via the Business Council of Alabama, the report said.

"Small contributors . . . simply can't keep up," the report said.

Other examples cited in the report include:

- In 2006, Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb got a total of 32 percent of her contributions from two PACs, including one run by the state Democratic Party.
- The Business Council's Progress PAC, ACJRC and a related PAC, Lawsuit Reform, provided nearly half of the money Drayton Nabers raised when he lost to Cobb that year.
- In 2008, Deborah Bell Paseur got 62 percent of her donations from the state Democratic Party. More than one-third of that, \$606,000, came from the plaintiff trial lawyer firm Beasley Allen Crow Methvin Portis and Miles.

The firm and its lawyers funneled money through 30 PACs en-route to the state Democratic Party and Paseur, the report said.

The 2008 race between Paseur and the man who beat her, Justice Greg Shaw, also illustrated the growing role outside advocacy groups play in state high court races, the report said.

That year the Virginia-based Center for Individual Freedom -- which does not disclose its donors -- spent more on ads supporting Shaw than the candidate himself, the report said.

But the combined \$1.9 million Shaw and the Center for Individual Freedom spent beat Paseur's ad spending, \$1.7 million.

"Massive spending on television is almost a prerequisite for gaining the bench," the report said. "To compete, judges need tremendous financial support, either in the form of large contributions or independent expenditures."

On the Web

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