

Bangor Daily News

Governor race spending already tops \$7.5 million

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AUGUSTA, Maine — The November election may still be six months away, yet the 2010 race for the Blaine House is already the most expensive gubernatorial election in Maine history.

But in a testament to the fact that big spending doesn't always get big returns at the ballot box, the candidate who received the most votes on Tuesday — Republican nominee Paul LePage — spent less than all but one of the 10 other primary candidates.

Collectively, the Republican and Democratic candidates for governor spent more than \$7.5 million on their primary campaigns, according to preliminary campaign finance reports filed with the Maine Ethics Commission.

Put in perspective, that not only obliterates the previous record for primary spending, but it also eclipses the roughly \$5.5 million spent by all candidates in the entire 1994 race and the \$5.1 million spent in 2006.

In fact, the amount of money expended so far on the 2010 race soon will surpass the \$8.6 million spent during the 2002 and 2006 gubernatorial campaigns combined — if it hasn't already. Two of the independent, or unenrolled, candidates in this year's race already have raised or lent themselves more than \$1.2 million.

The last time there was an "open seat" for governor in Maine, five candidates ended up on the 2002 primary or November ballots and along the way spent \$3.5 million. Then-U.S. Rep. John Baldacci spent the most that year at \$1.6 million.

In 2006, the Democratic and Republican nominees after the primaries — Baldacci and Chandler Woodcock, respectively — each spent roughly \$1.3 million over the course of the campaign.

Green Independent candidate Pat LaMarche, who like Woodcock participated in Maine's public campaign financing program, spent \$1.1 million, while unenrolled candidate Barbara Merrill used up roughly \$900,000 in campaign cash.

By comparison, this year's top spender, Republican Les Otten, already had spent nearly as much as Baldacci and Woodcock combined by the time the voting booths opened last Tuesday. Nonetheless, Otten's \$2.5 million war chest — bankrolled almost entirely with his own money — was not enough to overtake LePage's popularity among conservative voters.

\$110 a vote

So what was Otten's return on his investment?

Dividing Otten's campaign expenditures by the roughly 22,800 votes he received in Tuesday's primary yields a figure of a slightly less than \$110 a vote. (Note: Because that figure and similar figures for the other campaigns are based on preliminary spending reports

and unofficial vote counts, the final cost-per-vote ratio for each campaign may be slightly different.)

While campaigns may object to this technique as an oversimplification, many also keep track of the figures themselves for comparison purposes.

LePage, by contrast, spent about \$190,000 and received roughly 48,900 votes, according to the most recent unofficial results. That equates to about \$3.90 per vote.

The second-highest spender in the GOP primary was Bruce Poliquin, whose campaign finance reports show he doled out roughly \$711,000. But because only 6,500 ballots were cast for Poliquin, his cost-per-vote ratio is almost identical to Otten's at \$109 a vote.

The cost-per-vote ratio among the other Republican contenders are: Matt Jacobson, \$37 a vote; Sen. Peter Mills, \$32 a vote; Bill Beardsley, \$26 a vote; and Steve Abbott, \$21 a vote.

The differences on the Democratic side were less drastic, although once again the candidate with the lowest cost-per-vote ratio walked away with the nomination.

Senate President Libby Mitchell of Vassalboro spent just shy of \$700,000 on her primary campaign, roughly \$600,000 of which came from Maine's Clean Elections Fund. (The remainder was seed money that Mitchell raised and spent, as allowed, in the run-up to her certification as a Clean Elections candidate.) Mitchell spent about \$16 a vote.

Rosa Scarcelli spent the most on her campaign at \$850,000 — more than half of it her own money — and ended up paying about \$32 for each of the 26,300 votes she received.

Pat McGowan, who also ran as a Clean Elections candidate, spent about \$26 for every vote he received. The runner-up in the Democratic primary, former Attorney General Steve Rowe, got one vote for every \$19 he spent.

Maine political history has other examples of lopsided spending and election results.

For instance, in 1996, businessman Bob Monks spent roughly \$2 million in his bid for U.S. Senate but finished third in the primary behind Republican nominee and eventual Sen. Susan Collins. Monks' cost per vote: a whopping \$154, according to a Bangor Daily News analysis from the time.

"We've had some candidates spend very, very large amounts of money in races who have not won," said Kenneth Palmer, a retired University of Maine political science professor and author of numerous books on Maine politics.

"There is not any clear connection between the money spent and the election outcome," he said. On the other hand, Palmer added, a candidate must have "a respectable amount of money" to run and be successful in the general election.

LePage's campaign appears to have been successful, in large part because of a combination of a committed group of grass-roots volunteers statewide and a strong desire among Republican voters for a conservative candidate. The nearly 120,000 people who cast votes in the GOP primary made up a significantly higher number than anticipated.

LePage campaign manager John Morris offered this take on his candidate's high return on investment: "The amount we spent clearly demonstrates the fiscal responsibility of the candidate and that's the kind of frugality he will bring to Augusta with him. We are going to continue to operate as we have been."

Must you pay to play?

But can LePage's low-budget strategy lead him to the Blaine House?

Independent candidate Eliot Cutler of Cape Elizabeth already has spent in excess of \$530,000 on his campaign and recently surpassed the \$700,000 mark in total campaign contributions, according to documents filed this week with the Ethics Commission.

Similarly, independent candidate Shawn Moody of Gorham has lent himself \$500,000 — and already spent \$100,000 of it on ads — and reportedly is willing to spend more, if necessary.

The third unenrolled candidate, Kevin Scott of Andover, had amassed just a few thousand dollars in his campaign coffers so far.

While the LePage camp plans to hold true to its grass-roots-focused strategy, Morris said, the campaign would obviously be engaged in fundraising as well. But some observers have questioned whether LePage's conservative appeal will translate well into campaign cash, especially in a state known for having a more moderate-minded electorate.

"We will explore all of our avenues," Morris said.

As the sole remaining Clean Elections candidate in the race, Libby Mitchell already has received an additional \$600,000 in public financing as of this week. Mitchell could be eligible for an additional \$600,000 in matching funds should her rivals spend more.

In fact, Mitchell received her first disbursement of matching funds this week after Cutler notified state regulators that he had hit the \$700,000 mark.

Running a publicly financed campaign also has its risks. While Mitchell no longer has to worry about fundraising, she is powerless to respond financially if her contenders in the November election spend more than she does.

In other words, Mitchell's campaign war chest is capped at \$1.2 million regardless of how fast and free the cash flows from the other four candidates' bank accounts.

"The candidates agree to limit their campaign spending in return for having almost all of their campaigns paid for with public funds," said Jonathan Wayne, executive director of the Maine Ethics Commission, which administers the Clean Elections program.

Jeremy Kennedy, spokesman for the Mitchell campaign, pointed out that fundraising takes time and money, and some privately financed campaigns are forced to spend large sums in order to pull in donations.

"So I think it's probably put us at an advantage because it allows us to focus on the meat of the campaign" rather than on fundraising, Kennedy said.