



# THE MONEY BEHIND THE BALLOT

How Economics Connects to NJ's Ballot Reform

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Economics Supplement | Optional Module



# PATRONAGE: AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM

## WHAT IS PATRONAGE?

A patronage system is when political leaders give government jobs, contracts, and economic benefits to their supporters in exchange for loyalty and political support.

**Think of it as a trade:**

**Loyalty and votes IN, jobs and contracts OUT.**

## HOW THE COUNTY LINE HELPED

County party chairs controlled who got on the ballot line. Elected officials who owed their jobs to the party chair were more likely to approve contracts, appointments, and spending that benefited the chair's allies.

*Result: A cycle where political power created economic power, and economic power protected political power.*



## KEY ECONOMIC CONCEPT: INCENTIVES AND DISINCENTIVES

The county line created an economic incentive for candidates to seek party endorsement (guaranteed win = access to power and resources) and a disincentive for independent candidates to run (near-certain loss = wasted campaign spending). This reduced competition, which economists recognize as harmful to any system.

# FOLLOW THE MONEY: 2025 PRIMARY SPENDING

When the county line ended, more candidates ran. More candidates meant more spending.



## \$259M

Total spent on 2025  
governor's race  
(primary + general)

## \$27.30

Per NJ resident  
(#1 in the nation  
for per-capita spending)

## \$158M

Spent by independent  
groups (first time they  
outspent candidates)

## DISCUSSION: OPPORTUNITY COST

\$259 million is a lot of money. Economists call the next best use of that money the "opportunity cost." What else could \$259 million have paid for in New Jersey?

**About 2,590 teacher salaries for one year | About 8,600 four-year college scholarships | About 43 new school buildings**

Source: NJ ELEC, December 2025. Comparisons are approximate.



Full reference list: <https://www.agardresearchassociates.org/ballot-power-and-democracy-in-nj>



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