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## Report lauds high court financing

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Months after North Carolina lawmakers ended public financing for judicial campaigns, a new report says the system had a "powerful impact" on campaigns for the state's highest court.

The nonpartisan National Institute on Money in State Politics found that private contributions to Supreme Court races fell by almost half between 2004 and 2012.

It also found that, financially at least, statewide races became more competitive with public financing.

The report comes as candidates are filing for new elections to the Supreme Court and state Court of Appeals.

The Institute, which just studied Supreme Court races, is the latest group to praise North Carolina's public financing system.

The program offered candidates for the Supreme and appellate courts, as well as some Council of State offices, public money for their campaigns. Supporters said it helped immunize judges from the influence of well-financed special interests.

In 2012, all eight statewide judicial candidates took the money, which comes from voluntary tax check-offs and annual fees on attorneys.

"It looks like ... Supreme Court candidates will now need to go back and rely on contributions from private donors and political parties to fund their campaigns," said Denise Roth Barber, managing director of the Montana-based Institute.

### Lawmakers find fault

Last summer lawmakers ended public financing of judicial elections as part of a comprehensive voter bill, that also mandated voter IDs starting in 2016. Critics said public financing uses taxpayers' money to help elect candidates those taxpayers might oppose.

"We just felt that taxpayers were being told that their money was going to be used for candidates who might not have been their choice," Sen. Bob Rucho, a Matthews Republican, said Thursday.

Rucho said Republican lawmakers also took issue to the system's "rescue funds" provision. That allowed public financed candidates to tap an additional pot of money if they faced an opponent who was soundly outspending them. A federal court struck down the provision in 2012.

Gov. Pat McCrory said last year that he doesn't believe public financing has been effective in North Carolina or nationally. "Like running for City Council," he said at the time, "you ought to be able to raise your own money."

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Other critics said court rulings that opened up new channels of funding campaigns had muted the impact of public financing.

In 2012, for example, two state Supreme Court candidates each got about \$240,000 in public money. But outside groups spent \$2.6 million on the race, \$2.3 million of it backing incumbent Paul Newby. That year, only the governor's race drew more outside money.

### Public financing popular

The institute report found that while private donations comprised 77 percent of contributions in 2000 and 2002, before the Public Campaign Fund was in effect, it dropped to 40 percent between 2004 and 2012 when it was.

During that time, it found Supreme Court candidates got 56 percent of their money from public financing.

The 2002 law that created public financing required candidates to raise a certain amount of private money to qualify for public funds. It limited donations to judicial candidates to \$1,000. Last year the General Assembly raised that to \$5,000.

Among those lobbying to keep public financing were three former governors, Republicans Jim Holshouser and Jim Martin and Democrat Jim Hunt.

"There had been the concern that it doesn't look right to have judges raising money from the attorneys and others who come in their courtroom," said Bob Hall, director of Democracy North Carolina, a group that advocated for public financing.

Now, he added, "Basically people have the choice of being wealthy and well-connected or raising money from others who are wealthy."

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