

OUR OPINIONS

The money talks

■ Election law changes may have the biggest impact in judicial races, where wealthy donors can influence the courts.

Money makes a difference in city elections, but it can matter much more in some statewide races. Those include the four N.C. Supreme Court seats up for election next year, just as major changes in state campaign finance laws take effect.

The voting reform act passed by the legislature this summer allows more money and requires less disclosure of where it comes from. The result could be the election of justices to the state's highest court who owe their positions to wealthy donors with special interests.

Money talks in city elections. Candidates who raise tens of thousands of dollars for their campaigns can buy more yard signs, mail more brochures and purchase more advertising.

But candidates without much money can still make an impression on voters through appearances at forums, news media interviews and old-fashioned, door-to-door campaigning.

Someone running for a statewide judicial office can't reach millions of voters that way. The public doesn't know these candidates to begin with. Only expensive advertising and mass mailings can build name identification and give voters a sense of a candidate's qualifications.

North Carolina offered a successful public financing system in statewide judicial races from 2004 through 2012. Candidates qualified by raising a limited amount of money in small, individual donations and then were restricted to about \$250,000 in state funds. All eight statewide judicial candidates participated in this system last year.

It has been eliminated, putting North Carolina in line with states

where judicial elections draw millions of dollars from political parties, wealthy donors and corporate interests. Our legislature raised individual donor limits in judicial races from \$1,000 to \$5,000. Furthermore, anyone can give unlimited amounts of money to so-called independent organizations that in turn can spend it to promote or attack candidates. The law was also loosened so that ads produced by these groups no longer have to reveal the largest contributors. Candidates won't have to appear in their own ads to state their approval.

Almost all public attention on the voting reform act focused on the photo ID requirement. Other provisions were enacted with little awareness or debate. They'll give wealthy interests more influence in choosing North Carolina's government — and this influence might be greatest in the courts. Why? Because voters typically are less familiar with judicial candidates and therefore can be swayed more easily. They may hear campaign messages only from the candidates who have the most money speaking for them.

Voters should ask why the state legislature and Gov. Pat McCrory want more money spent, with less accountability, in judicial races. They should ask why special-interest groups might spend millions of dollars to influence elections for our state's highest court. They should ask whether this will be a better way to elect Supreme Court justices than creating an equal playing field through public financing.

If big money electing a City Council bothers anyone, how about big money electing a Supreme Court?