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# A message delivered in spite of the media

## On school budgets, Christie spoke directly to voters.

By Carl Golden

On the surface, there appears to be no connection between last month's mass rejection of New Jersey school district budgets and the report a week later that daily newspaper circulation continued its decline in the first quarter of this year, falling an average of 9 percent nationally and as much as 20 percent in some cases.

The two events are linked, though, by the weakening influence of the traditional media on public policy.

For years, daily newspapers were the main source of information about government and public issues. Elected officials paid heed to the news and opinions they found on their doorsteps each morning. To do otherwise was to risk appearing ill-informed or out of touch.

Those days have vanished, though, and the rejection of nearly six in 10 school district budgets provides further evidence that newspapers have moved closer to being displaced as the principal molder of public opinion.

The past rates of success of school budgets owed much to the influence of the print media. Voters absorbed information about schools largely from a single source - their local paper - and came away with, if not a favorable impression of local school district management and spending, at least a neutral one.

Voter turnout in the school elections rarely reached 20 percent. The participation generally reflected the newspaper coverage: minimal and favorably inclined toward the budget question.

New media - blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter - have unleashed a sea change in how information is disseminated and opinions formed. They have muscled their way onto center stage by providing instant access to an enormously broad spectrum of views and opinions. They are immediate, spontaneous, convenient, and cheap.

It's no longer necessary to wait for tomorrow's paper or tune in to the nightly news to learn what happened today. Through the new media, elected officials can reach a vastly greater number of people than through the traditional media, direct and unfiltered.

Gov. Christie's administration has used the wide range of outlets and their enormous reach to generate increased public awareness of the school board elections. It produced an unusually high turnout and drove home the message that a negative vote on budgets was the only weapon at taxpayers' disposal to curb spending. The school budget rejection rate was the highest in 35 years.

When Christie suggested that budgets be defeated in districts where teachers refused to accept a wage freeze, newspaper editorials were unanimous in urging voters to ignore the governor and cast ballots based on their and their children's best interests. Several papers were sharply critical of what they saw as Christie's heavy-handed involvement in local matters.

The governor's press staff issued several blog posts a day emphasizing the wage-freeze theme, arguing that teachers refusing to accept cost-cutting recommendations were risking layoffs. Statements from Education Commissioner Bret Schundler echoing the governor's message were also posted. A press office staffer with primary responsibility for the governor's Twitter account shared the same message with the account's followers.

In the end, there was no mistaking which side won.

It's impossible to know how the voting would have turned out if the traditional media had been the sole provider of information and opinion. But the rate of budget approval would likely have been more in line with history if there were nothing of consequence to counter the message of newspaper coverage.

As more elected officials understand they have the unfettered ability to craft and deliver messages with no middleman, Web sites, blogs, and social networking will continue to grow and supplant the traditional media. It's a one-sided conversation that works to the exclusive benefit of, well, one side.

As someone who grew up in the newspaper business (I was a newspaper reporter for 12 years), I am pained at the industry's economic distress and its effect on the livelihoods of dedicated people. At the same time, the rise and impact of the new media were unmistakable in this unusual election result.

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