

Florio tries to rally downcast Dems

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EAST BRUNSWICK — New Jersey Democrats may be down politically after Tuesday's elections but they are back in the money today after a "Governor's Gala" here last night that grossed close to \$2 million.

Gov. Jim Florio, returning to the site of his election night victory party just one year ago, told a subdued audience that paid \$1,500 a head to attend, "The 1991 campaign begins tonight."

Florio was working to rally the battered Democrats for next year's elections in which Democratic control of both houses of the Legislature is on the line.

It was a tough audience.

The presence of U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley, who came perilously close to losing an election he was supposed to win in a landslide, and other Democrats who felt the sting of angry voters on Tuesday dramatized the nature of the uphill battle facing Florio.

THE GOVERNOR declared he is "confident" the 1991 elections "will end with a ringing affirmation because we are doing the right thing."

The estimated 1,370 people who attended the fund-raising dinner at the Ramada Renaissance Tower Cen-

ter applauded Florio's speech warmly, but many of those same people admitted privately that Florio and the Democrats are in deep trouble with the voters.

Interviews with prominent Democrats and elected officials attending the reception indicated many of them doubt Florio can make a comeback.

"These are darker days than we saw at any time during the 1970s under (former Democratic Gov. Brendan) Byrne," asserted one veteran legislator who asked not to be identified.

But others, including Alan Karcher, who opposed Florio in the Democratic primary, said the election setbacks for the Democrats "were something that happens periodically.

"Most of the last eight years when political leaders in New Jersey were popular was an aberration," Karcher said. "What's happening now is a return to the normal."

MANY OF the Democrats and the party contributors were as distressed last night about Bradley's performance and showing in the election as they were over Florio's low ratings in the opinion polls.

Asked about the criticism he is getting over his campaign, Bradley commented, "All I can say is that this is two days after the election."

Bradley was introduced at the dinner but gave no speech.

Adding to the discomfort for the Democrats was the presence of about 80 members of the anti-tax group Hands Across New Jersey, who held what they called a "victory party" in a suite of rooms a few hundred feet from the Democrats' party.

The Hands organizers claimed credit for "bringing the Democratic Goliath (Bradley) to his knees" and for defeating Democrats in a series of crucial elections across the state.

Hands officials, led by Pat Ralston, a co-founder of the tax protest group, vowed they would continue their "grass-roots" protest into next year's elections.

The Hands leaders said they have not decided how they will finance and operate their group, which has described itself as non-partisan, even though it worked to defeat Democratic candidates.

Ralston said the organization decided to hold its victory party on the same night and at the same place the Democrats were meeting. "because we wanted him (Florio) to know that wherever he goes, we go."

THE GROUP held a \$30-dollar-a-head buffet compared to the \$1,500 tab for the Democrats.

Those attending the Democratic party wore black tie or evening dresses, while most of the Hands celebrants were more casually dressed. But their Essex County coordinator, Kathy Powers, did arrive in an ankle-length fur coat.

The Democratic fund-raiser may have been the largest in terms of money raised in the history of the Republican and Democratic parties in New Jersey, some observers said.

At Florio's request the Democrats will donate \$10,000 of the proceeds to Trenton's Lifeline Shelter for women and children.

Florio said he is aware of criticism that political parties raise too much money but argued: "The Republicans are sparing no efforts to raise money and so long as that system of campaign fund-raising continues, we have to do the same thing."

The Democratic State Committee is currently operating in the red, according to Lewis Katz, chairman for the Florio dinner.

The committee spent more than \$300,000 in election campaigns this fall and is gearing up for an all-out effort to maintain control of the Legislature next year.