

Campaign Reform Given Even Chance

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SACRAMENTO — An initiative to limit runaway legislative campaign spending in California has a "better than 50-50 chance" of passage when it appears on the June 1988 ballot, according to a principal organizer of the long-awaited initiative drive.

"It's not going to be easy," said Walter Zelman, executive director of Common Cause, major sponsor of the measure. "It will require a fairly sizable amount of money. The chances [of passage] are 50-50, but tough."

According to a report by the bipartisan California Commission on Campaign Financing, candidates spent \$57.1 million on 80 Assembly and 20 Senate seats in the 1986 elections. Of that amount — which was 30 percent higher than 1984 expenditures — only 10 percent was contributed by individuals giving \$100 or less.

The initiative was certified for the ballot by the secretary of state's office in late October after closer review of

signatures gathered in 1986 revealed that the measure had 100 more signatures than necessary to qualify. The initiative failed to qualify for the November 1986 ballot after a random county sample-verification process found it short the required number of signatures.

Acting under provisions of Government Code Sec. 6253.5, proponents examined the disqualified signatures and contended that 7,540 signatures in eight counties had been wrongly disqualified, primarily as a result of illegible names and addresses. County elections officials then found that 6,895 of those signatures were valid — making the total 100 more than the 393,835 signatures required.

If passed in June 1988, the initiative would set limits on contributions and loans in campaigns for legislative offices and would establish a Campaign Reform Fund to which taxpayers could designate \$3 per year from their income taxes. Legislative candidates meeting certain requirements and receiving "threshold" contributions from other sources could receive matching amounts from the fund.

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The measure also would limit spending by candidates — a feature Zelman says is key to true campaign finance reform.

"History suggests that contribution limits alone do not reduce spending," Zelman said, "or the pressure on candidates to raise money. That pressure leads to all sorts of problems. If you don't put a cap on spending, you don't stop that problem."

"The California campaign spending arms race is totally out of control," said Walter Gerken, an executive with Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Co. and chairman of the initiative's campaign committee, called Californians to Limit Campaign Spending. "The rush to raise greater and greater amounts of campaign money in larger and larger denominations is eroding public confidence in political institutions."

"Candidates, the voters and even major contributors are beginning to realize the system is in need of fundamental overhaul," Gerken added. "We are not here to point a finger of blame but to dedicate ourselves to correcting a problem that is undermining public confidence in California's electoral and legislative processes."

The initiative effort grew out of frustration over legislative and gubernatorial reluctance to support a successful legislative solution to campaign spending — and to limit the increasing influence of special-interest contributors who donate through powerful political action committees, called PACs.

"We've been advocating such a measure for many, many years," Zelman said. "It had become clear that the Legislature and the governor would not act."

A reform bill was passed by the Legislature in 1984, Zelman noted, but it was vetoed by Gov. George Deukmejian. Another measure — less comprehensive than the initiative, Zelman said — by Sen. Bill Lockyer, D-Hayward, will come before the Legislature when it resumes in January.

"Incumbents do pretty well under the present system," Zelman observed, "and they are reluctant to change it." Even if a reform measure were successful in the Legislature, he said, it probably would be killed by the combined forces of Republican opposition and a governor's veto.

"The bottom line of our initiative is that it will level the monetary playing field a bit," Zelman added. "Even the big givers are getting sick of the system."

They're sick of the fund raising. Even the lobbyists are getting tired of it, because they think they can win [for their clients] on the merits."

The measure is supported by business groups such as the California Chamber of Commerce and the California Business Roundtable, by political reform groups such as the League of Women Voters, and by a coalition of other business, civic, consumer, labor and education groups, including the California Federation of Teachers and the California Newspaper Publishers Association.

Zelman said funding will be difficult, but he is optimistic, "because people care about good government." Zelman said he expects opposition from big political contributors such as the California Medical Association, but supporters are hopeful other major players in the political fund-raising wars will see the value of the initiative's provisions.

Zelman said he has discussed the subject "over the years" with representatives of the California Trial Lawyers Association, one of the major contributors to legislative campaigns, "and they may be the only big PAC that does support us."

"I hope they support us," he added. "They've taken fairly progressive stands on many issues, but they may be a little torn — between the sense that the system is out of control and the fact that it's been pretty good to them."

Other campaign finance reform proposals are being circulated by other groups — one by Assemblyman Ross Johnson, R-La Habra, and Senators Joseph Montoya, D-Whittier, and Quentin Kopp, Ind.-San Francisco, and another, by Rep. William Thomas, R-Bakersfield, and Dan Stanford, former chairman of the state Fair Political Practices Commission. Neither has qualified yet for the ballot.

Among its many provisions, the Gerken-Common Cause initiative, called the Campaign Spending Limits Act of 1988, would:

- limit total expenditures by legislative candidates in primary and general election campaigns.
- limit the amount of contributions made by individuals and groups to state legislative campaigns.
- prohibit transfers of funds from one legislative candidate to another.
- offer limited matching funds to candidates who agree to spending limitations.