
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Anna Caballero, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 596 (Ortega) - Elections: ballot disclosures

Version: September 9, 2025

Policy Vote: L., P.E. & R. 5 - 0, E. & C.A.
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Urgency: No

Mandate: Yes

Hearing Date: September 11, 2025

Consultant: Robert Ingenito

Bill Summary: AB 596 would require that the title and summary that appears on the ballot for a statewide initiative or referendum include a list of the top three contributors of more than \$100,000 to campaign committees that paid to circulate petitions to qualify the initiative or referendum for the ballot.

Fiscal Impact:

- The Secretary of State (SOS) indicates that it would incur first-year costs of \$476,000, and \$296,000 annually thereafter, to implement the provisions of the bill (General Fund, see Staff Comments).
- By increasing the duties of county elections officials with respect to examining specified petitions and printing ballots, this bill creates a state-mandated local program. To the extent the Commission on State Mandates determines that the provisions of this bill create a new program or impose a higher level of service on counties, they could claim reimbursement of those costs. The magnitude across the 58 counties is unknown (and would be driven by the number of ballot measures and contributors disclosed for each election), but likely in the millions of dollars per election to prepare and mail longer ballots to voters (General Fund, see Staff Comments).
- By allowing a voter to seek a writ of mandate requiring that identified contributors be amended or deleted, this bill could in potentially significant cost pressures to the courts; the magnitude is unknown (Trial Court Trust Fund (TCTF)). The specific number of new actions that could be filed under the bill also is unknown; however, it generally costs about \$10,500 to operate a courtroom for an eight-hour day. Courts are not funded on the basis of workload, and increased pressure on TCTF may create a need for increased funding for courts from the General Fund. The enacted 2025-26 budget includes \$38 million in ongoing support from the General Fund to continue to backfill TCTF for revenue declines.

Background: SB 47 (Allen, Chapter 563, Statutes of 2019) requires an individual asked to sign a state or local initiative, referendum, or recall petition be provided with information about the committee paying for the petition to be circulated, if any, and the "Official Top Funders" making campaign contributions to that committee. SB 47 allowed the disclosure to appear on the petition itself or on a separate document required to be shown to individuals asked to sign the petition.

Proposed Law: This bill, among other things, would do the following:

- Require SOS to identify the top three contributors with the largest amount of cumulative contributions of \$100,000 or more to all committees who paid for the circulation of petitions to qualify the statewide initiative or referendum for the ballot.
- Require that the ballot label for a statewide initiative or referendum measure include the names of the top three contributors identified by SOS, as specified.
- Require SOS to make available for public examination a copy of the top three contributors, as specified, prior to printing ballots, and allow a voter to seek a writ of mandate to amend the list of contributors.
- Apply its provisions only to a statewide initiative or referendum measure that receives an official title and summary from the Attorney General on or after January 1, 2026.

Related Legislation: AB 1188 (Ortega) was very similar to this bill, and would have required a ballot to contain detailed information about the contributors to campaign committees formed to support or oppose statewide initiatives and referenda. The bill was held under submission on the Suspense File of the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

Staff Comments: SOS notes that the current marginal cost of adding a page to the Voter Information Guide (VIG) is \$123,000. This costing amount was cited in the Assembly Appropriation Committee's analysis of AB 1188 earlier this year. Specifically, SOS indicated that AB 1188 would have resulted in additional pages being added to the VIG, with resulting costs depending on (1) the number of ballot measures at each election, and (2) the extent to which additional VIG pages would be required.

SOS indicates that its implementation of AB 596 would not result in costs related to printing and mailing the VIG. Instead, SOS costs reflect three additional positions to support workload driven by examination and certification of voting technologies that cannot be absorbed by existing staff.

As noted previously, this bill would result in a state-mandated local program. Specifically, the bill would result in local elections workload related to ballot design, translation, proofing, printing, mailing, and processing. Resulting costs vary widely by county, but as noted previously, the aggregate amount across all counties would likely reach the millions of dollars per election.

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