
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 596
Author: Ortega (D)
Amended: 9/9/25 in Senate
Vote: 21

Prior Votes not relevant, pursuant to Senate Rule 29.10(c).

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS: 4-2, 9/11/25
Ayes: Caballero, Cabaldon, Richardson, Wahab
Noes: Seyarto, Dahle
No Vote Recorded: Grayson

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 63-10, 4/28/25 – See last page for vote.

SUBJECT: Elections: ballot disclosures

SOURCE: California Federation of Labor Unions, AFL-CIO

DIGEST: This bill requires that the ballot for a statewide initiative or referendum include, in addition to the title, summary, fiscal impact, and lists of supporters and opponents, 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.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Allows electors to propose statutes and amendments to the California Constitution and to adopt or reject them through the initiative process or to approve or reject statutes, with some exceptions, through the referendum process.
- 2) Requires that ballot measures submitted to the voters shall be abbreviated on the ballot in a ballot label. For statewide initiative measures or referenda, the ballot label shall include a condensed ballot title and summary of no more than 75 words.

- 3) Requires the ballot label for statewide ballot measures to be followed by a listing of supporters and opponents of the ballot measure, as specified. The list of supporters and list of opponents shall not exceed 125 characters in length each.
- 4) Requires, when a campaign committee pays for the circulation of a state or local initiative, referendum, or recall petition, as specified, that the committee disclose on a list of “Official Top Funders” on the petition itself or on a separate sheet that is presented to prospective petition signers. This list must identify the committee’s name, any qualifying top contributors, the month and year during which the Official Top Funders disclosure is valid, and an address to a webpage that includes the most recent Official Top Funders disclosure. The disclosure must include the three highest contributors whose cumulative contributions are \$50,000 or more.

This bill:

- 1) Requires the Secretary of State (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.
- 2) Requires that the ballot label for a statewide initiative or referendum measure include the names of the top three contributors identified by the SOS. These shall be listed after supporters and opponents of the measure and with the heading “Top Funders of Petition to Qualify Ballot Measure” for an initiative and “Top Funders of Petition to Overturn the Law” for a referendum.
- 3) Prescribes which abbreviations may be used and which phrases in an organization’s name may be excluded from the ballot label disclosure.
- 4) Requires the SOS to make available for public examination a copy of the top three contributors pursuant to 1) of this bill, prior to printing ballots, and allows a voter to seek a writ of mandate to amend the list of contributors.
- 5) Applies 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.
- 6) Makes provisions of the bill severable.

Background

Ballot Form. Existing law requires a ballot to comply with a variety of laws that dictate its form and content. For example, existing law requires that a ballot contain the title of each office, the names of all qualified candidates, ballot designations, titles and summaries of measures submitted to voters, and instructions to voters, among other things. Moreover, existing law requires a ballot to be printed in a certain form, as specified. To help with spacing issues on the ballot, it is common practice to include other important election information in the state or local voter information guide.

Starting with the 2024 elections, AB 1416 (Santiago, Chapter 751, Statutes of 2022) requires the ballot label for a statewide measure and for a local measure, at the option of each county and if certain conditions are met, to include a listing of the supporters or opponents of the measure taken from the supporters and opponents of the ballot arguments printed in the voter information guide.

Through SB 280 (Cervantes, Chapter 97, Statutes of 2025,) the Legislature waived the requirements of AB 1416 for the statewide election being held on November 4, 2025.

Comments

- 1) *Author's Statement.* This bill increases transparency in our ballot initiative and referendum process. While it was originally designed to empower citizens against powerful interests, the proposition process is vulnerable to manipulation by well-funded corporations and individuals who spend hundreds of millions to sway voter decisions and obscure the true substance of the question on the ballot. This bill increases transparency by requiring that the three top funders that paid for the circulation of a proposition be printed directly on the ballot label so that voters can make informed choices.
- 2) *Longer Ballots.* Prior to the enactment of AB 1416 in 2022, the ballot label was capped at 75 words. AB 1416 requires the names of persons and organizations supporting and opposing a state ballot measure to be added onto the ballot label. While the lists of supporters and opponents are not included in the 75-word cap, AB 1416 did limit this list of supporters and opponents to no more than 125 characters each.

For initiatives, this bill will further add to the ballot the phrase “Top Funders of Petition to Qualify Ballot Measure” plus the names of three organizations, and for referenda, this bill adds the phrase “Top Funders of Petition to Overturn the Law” plus the names of three organizations. These phrases and lists would not be included in the 75-word cap, nor are they limited in the number of

characters. Thus, if this bill is signed into law, it would significantly increase the length of general election ballots, as state initiative and referendum measures do not appear on primary election ballots. In the past decade, general elections have included as many as 15 statewide initiatives and referenda on a single ballot.

Provisions like those in this bill make the ballot ever longer and more cumbersome for voters and for election officials to compile, translate, distribute, and count.

- 3) *Potential for Chicanery.* Even though existing state law provides protections for the types of organizations that could be listed on a ballot, the requirements of this bill could be gamed over time. For example, individuals could form new organizations with sincere-sounding names specifically to support initiatives and referenda in order to get those sincere sounding names on to the ballot. The long-term ramifications could actually create more confusion among voters if the names of organizations, or even individuals, are manipulated to persuade voters.

The Senate should consider these and any other potential ramifications of placing the names of those who paid to circulate petitions to qualify an initiative or referendum on the ballot. The Senate should also consider the appropriate venue for debate, such as the voter information guide, television, mail, and town halls, between supporters and opponents of a ballot measure and whether the ballot should be expanded and become one of those venues.

- 4) *Politicizing the Ballot.* If passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor, this bill would allow even more individuals and organizations to be listed on the ballot. Historically, other than the listing of a party preference for specific offices, the ballot has remained largely neutral, in terms of the ballot being politicized. The ballot itself is sometimes considered “sacred.”

After all the debate, endorsements, and advertisements, the ballot is where the voter makes the final decision to approve, reject, or skip a ballot measure and that decision is made on one of the most neutral ways possible (*i.e.*, a ballot with brief information about the measure, an option for “Yes,” and an option for “No”). The debate over a ballot measure should be about the merits of the ballot measure and not a debate or another venue for a debate between individuals and/or organizations who support and oppose a ballot measure.

Related/Prior Legislation

AB 1188 (Ortega) of 2025, similar to this bill, would have required a ballot to contain detailed information about the contributors to campaign committees formed to support or oppose statewide initiatives and referenda. That bill remains on the Assembly Appropriations Committee's suspense file.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: Yes

SUPPORT: (Verified 9/12/25)

California Federation of Labor Unions, AFL-CIO (source)
California Clean Money Campaign

OPPOSITION: (Verified 9/12/25)

Airlines for America
Black Small Business Association
California Association of Clerks and Election Officials
California Association of Realtors
California Building Industry
California Chamber of Commerce
California Farm Bureau

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 63-10, 4/28/25

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alanis, Alvarez, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Carrillo, Chen, Connolly, Davies, Dixon, Elhawary, Fong, Gabriel, Garcia, Gipson, Mark González, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Irwin, Jackson, Kalra, Krell, Lee, Lowenthal, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Patel, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Ransom, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Soria, Stefani, Valencia, Wallis, Ward, Wicks, Wilson, Zbur, Rivas

NOES: Castillo, DeMaio, Gallagher, Jeff Gonzalez, Hadwick, Hoover, Lackey, Macedo, Ta, Tangipa

NO VOTE RECORDED: Ellis, Flora, Patterson, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Solache

Prepared by: Carrie Cornwell / E. & C.A. / (916) 651-4106
9/12/25 11:10:26

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