

CONCURRENCE IN SENATE AMENDMENTS

AB 596 (Ortega)

As Amended September 9, 2025

Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires ballots to contain detailed information about the top financial contributors to the effort to qualify a statewide initiative or referendum for the ballot.

Senate Amendments

Delete the Assembly-approved version of the bill, and instead:

- 1) Require the Secretary of State (SOS), in the case of a statewide initiative or referendum measure that is appearing on the ballot, to identify the three contributors of \$100,000 or more with the largest amounts of cumulative contributions to all campaign committees formed in support of the measure and that paid for the circulation of the measure.
- 2) Require, in the case of a statewide initiative or referendum measure that is appearing on the ballot, that the following be printed on the ballot following the condensed ballot title and summary and the list of supporters and opponents of the measure:
 - a) In the case of a statewide initiative measure, the text "Top Funders of Petition to Qualify Ballot Measure:" followed by the names of the three largest contributors of \$100,000 or more to the committees in support of the measure and that paid for the circulation of the measure, as determined by the SOS.
 - b) In the case of a statewide referendum measure, the text "Top Funders of Petition to Overturn the Law:" followed by the names of the three largest contributors of \$100,000 or more to the committees that paid for the circulation of the petitions to qualify the referendum for the ballot, as determined by the SOS.
- 3) Provides that the ballot text required by 2) does not count toward the 75-word limit for the condensed title and summary of the ballot measure, and require that text to be made available for public examination at the same time and in the same manner as the public examination of the ballot label for each state ballot measure.
- 4) Require each top contributor disclosed on the ballot to be separated by a semicolon. Provide that if there are no top contributors, then instead of top contributors, the text "None of \$100,000 or more" will appear.
- 5) Require the text "Top Funders of Petition to Qualify Ballot Measure:" or "Top Funders of Petition to Overturn the Law:" to be emphasized (e.g., by use of bold or underlining) or printed in all capital letters.
- 6) Permit the type size of ballot labels to be reduced to a type size no smaller than 8-point font if including the list of top contributors in the ballot labels would necessitate the printing of an extra ballot card compared to the ballot labels not including them. Require, in such a case, that the type size be reduced by the same amount for all ballot measures.

- 7) Require the disclosure of the name of a top contributor to be shortened using specified abbreviations and excluding specified words and terms that are not necessary to understand the identity of the contributor.

COMMENTS

As approved by the Assembly, this bill would have prohibited an employer from preventing any employee from wearing a face covering, including a respirator, unless it would create a safety hazard. Subsequent to the Assembly's approval, this bill was amended in the Senate to delete the Assembly-approved provisions and to add the current provisions. The provisions added in the Senate are related, but not identical, to provisions that were included in AB 1188 (Ortega) of the current legislative session, which was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee's suspense file.

Existing law requires a ballot to comply with a variety of laws that dictate its form and content. For example, a ballot must contain the title of each office, the names of qualified candidates, ballot designations, titles and summaries of measures submitted to voters, and instructions to voters, among other things. After meeting these requirements, limited space remains for additional content. As a result, other important election information typically is included in the state or local voter information guides.

This bill, for the first time, requires the identities of certain campaign contributors to be listed on the ballot. Specifically, the ballot would include a listing of the three largest contributors of \$100,000 or more to campaign committees that paid for the circulation of each statewide initiative or referendum measure. This information would appear immediately after the ballot label for each measure.

It is unclear whether this requirement will provide voters with accurate and balanced information. The listed contributors would only reflect spending on qualification efforts—not the often much larger sums spent after a measure qualifies for the ballot. Moreover, the ballot will reflect campaign contributions on only one side of the ballot measure in question. Legislative measures would not include any contributor disclosures at all, creating inconsistency and potentially confusing voters about why contributor information appears for some measures but not others.

Adding contributor information directly to the ballot also risks politicizing it. As the ballot is the final thing that people see before casting a vote, the information it contains is seen at the most influential moment in the voting process. For that reason, ballot content is traditionally brief, neutral, factual, and nonprejudicial. Highlighting certain campaign contributors—particularly on only one side of an issue—may imply undue importance of that information, and could prejudice voter perceptions.

The listing of campaign contributors on the ballot also likely will increase the length of the ballot in statewide general elections, when statewide initiative and referendum measures generally appear. That's especially true in light of recent policy changes that expanded ballot content to include lists of supporters and opponents of ballot measures. In jurisdictions that must print ballots in multiple languages, the space and logistical challenges could be even greater.

According to the Author

"AB 596 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. AB 596 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."

Arguments in Support

The sponsor of this bill, the California Federation of Labor Unions, writes in support, "Well-funded ideological interests can also put their proposals on the ballot if they do not agree with the actions of the democratically elected Legislature and Governor. Instead of representative democracy for the entire state, billionaires can fund campaigns to move their narrow, often self-serving, agendas in ways the public does not see or understand. The result is a two-tier system of democracy that reflects a broader political shift. Billionaires and corporations are using their limitless funding, influence, and media presence to write their own laws on the ballot. AB 596 brings more transparency on the main funders to qualify ballot measures to voters where it matters most—on the ballot label. This bill will require that the top three funders that paid to qualify an initiative or referendum are listed on the ballot label along with the supporters and opponents, modeled on what is already required on initiative petitions. AB 596 brings more transparency on what interests are really behind initiatives in the place where all voters can see it."

Arguments in Opposition

In opposition to this bill, the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials writes, "The additional requirements of AB 596 for State measures and referenda would create significant additional work and costs for counties without appropriating State funds for the counties to implement the new mandated services. This includes new mandated work and costs related to ballot design, translation, proofing, printing, mailing, and processing. As the officials charged with conducting fair and transparent elections in California, we share the Legislature's desire to ensure voters are informed about measures and referenda when voting. However, we must also be mindful of the potential voter confusion and real cost implications that would occur if too much information is added to ballots. Detailed information about State measures and referenda is included [in] the State Voter Information Guide that is provided to every voter and on the Secretary of State's website. Space on ballots is at a premium. When it is proposed to add additional information to the ballot, counties must carefully consider the cost of creating additional ballot cards... Moreover, the provision to allow counties to shrink the font used on ballots to no small[er] than 8-point font in order to avoid adding another card to their ballot is not a practical alternative and fails to recognize the detrimental impact on ballot readability. As elections officials we are committed to designing readable ballots and using 8-point font is not a viable nor advisable strategy for election administrators. Finally, adding too much information to a single ballot question on the ballot can confuse some voters. In its research, the Center for Civic Design has found that when voters can't understand long ballot questions, they are more likely to skip them and miss a chance to cast their vote. Voters are also less likely to vote on the rest of the ballot after a long and confusingly worded question."

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

- 1) 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).
- 2) 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).
- 3) By allowing a voter to seek a writ of mandate requiring that identified contributors be amended or deleted, this bill could result 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.

VOTES:

ASM LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT: 6-0-1

YES: Ortega, Chen, Elhawary, Kalra, Lee, Ward

ABS, ABST OR NV: Flora

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-2-2

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Hart, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache

NO: Ta, Tangipa

ABS, ABST OR NV: Sanchez, Dixon

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 63-10-6

YES: 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

NO: Castillo, DeMaio, Gallagher, Jeff Gonzalez, Hadwick, Hoover, Lackey, Macedo, Ta, Tangipa

ABS, ABST OR NV: Ellis, Flora, Patterson, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Solache

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