

Another View: Don't repeal campaign limits – strengthen them

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Derek Cressman, the Western regional director of Common Cause and author of "The Recall's Broken Promise – How Big Money Still Runs California Politics," is responding to Dan Walters' July 2 column "Legislators could opt for sanity." In his column Walters advocated to "repeal campaign contribution limits, allow anyone to give anything they wish to anyone they wish, and require full and immediate disclosure of all such transactions."

Dan Walters' suggestion to eliminate limits on how much money California elected officials can raise from special interests would weaken disclosure, increase the power of wealthy donors, and take us back to the days of huge campaign contributions that led to the recall of Gov. Gray Davis.

It is true that some donors evade contribution limits to candidates by giving unlimited checks to independent campaigns. We need to stop this, but eliminating a law to stop people from sidestepping it makes no more sense than legalizing burglary in an effort to deter shoplifting.

California's current disclosure laws need improvement, but they already require the largest donors to identify themselves in the names of independent committees that appear directly in any ad. If the same donor could write the same sized check to a candidate, they would go unmentioned in the committee name and be hidden in the outdated electronic campaign finance filing system that few voters ever see. Voters should be supporting the California DISCLOSE Act and an upgrade to our Cal- ACCESS database if they want to ensure that money is transparent, not encouraging the hiding of funds in candidate coffers.

When candidates take checks from billionaires, they can use the money to fund junkets to Hawaii, give it to other candidates as a way of buying a leadership post in the Legislature, save it in a war chest to scare off opponents or run for a future office.

For far too long we have seen candidates use campaign money as a personal slush fund. When billionaires write checks to an independent campaign they have a louder voice than the rest of us, but they raise issues that a candidate might otherwise have avoided. Both politicians and donors prefer that money be deposited straight into the coffers of candidates, and that is precisely why voters oppose it. The potential for elected officials to shake down a donor for a contribution in exchange for policy favors increases the connection between the candidate and the money.

We should be doing all we can to distance our elected officials from campaign funds by lowering the contribution limits, increasing transparency between candidates and donors, providing public funds to candidates who refuse big contributions and reversing the Supreme Court's misguided rulings that have struck down limits on contributions to independent committees. Heading in the opposite direction would be truly insane.

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