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California State Senate

ELECTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS



SABRINA CERVANTES
CHAIR

AGENDA

Wednesday, September 10, 2025
9 a.m. -- State Capitol, Room 112

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Carrie Cornwell

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MEASURES HEARD IN FILE ORDER

1. AB 596 Ortega Elections: ballot disclosures.

PURSUANT TO SENATE RULE 29.10 (D)

2. SB 852 Elections and Constitutional Amendments Political Reform Act of 1974: Citizens Redistricting Commission.

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON
ELECTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS**
Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: AB 596 **Hearing Date:** 9/10/25
Author: Ortega
Version: 9/9/25
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Carrie Cornwell

Subject: Elections: ballot disclosures

DIGEST

This bill requires that the title and summary that appears on the ballot for a statewide initiative or referendum include, in addition to 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 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.

This committee 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. This committee 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.

PRIOR ACTION

Assembly votes and previous Senate votes are not relevant.

POSITIONS

Sponsor: California Federation of Labor Unions, AFL-CIO

Support: None received

Oppose: None received

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**SENATE COMMITTEE ON
ELECTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS**
Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 852 **Hearing Date:** 9/10/25
Author: Committee on Elections and Constitutional Amendments
Version: 8/27/25
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Carrie Cornwell

Subject: Political Reform Act of 1974: Citizens Redistricting Commission

DIGEST

This bill makes noncontroversial changes to the Political Reform Act (PRA) on various matters and to the Voters FIRST Act on how a vacancy on the Citizens Redistricting Commission (CRC) is filled.

ANALYSIS

Existing law:

- 1) Includes the PRA, which establishes California's campaign finance and disclosure laws for state and local campaigns, candidates, officeholders, and ballot measures and which created the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) to implement, administer, and enforce the PRA.
- 2) Prohibits, through the PRA, a person from receiving, delivering, or attempting to deliver a campaign contribution in the State Capitol, any state office building, or any office for which the state pays the majority of the rent other than a legislative district office.
- 3) Allows the Legislature to amend the PRA provided that it does so in a manner that furthers the purposes of the PRA; by a two-thirds vote of each house and with the governor's signature; with the final version of the bill in print for at least eight days prior to the final floor vote in each house, or 12 days if the final set of amendments add PRA provisions; and after delivering the bill in its final form to the FPPC, which distributes it via email to the news media and to every person who has requested copies of such bills.
- 4) Requires Legislative Counsel to make available and expeditiously send emails alerting that a bill to amend the PRA has been introduced, referred to committee, voted upon, amended, or acted upon by the governor.
- 5) Requires a specified list of high ranking officials to electronically file statements of economic interest, also known as Form 700s, rather than on paper.

- 6) Creates the 14-member CRC and requires the members of the CRC to fill any CRC vacancy that occurs on or after December 31 of a year ending in the two within the 90 days after the vacancy occurs.

This bill:

- 1) Includes local government offices and legislative district offices among the locations where a person cannot receive nor deliver a campaign contribution.
- 2) Deletes the requirement for the FPPC to distribute copies of bills that amend the PRA.
- 3) Adds public officials who manage public investments to those who must file their Form 700s electronically.
- 4) Permits rather than requires the CRC to fill a vacancy in its membership that occurs after a year ending in a two.

COMMENTS

Committee Bill. This bill is one of the Senate Committee on Elections and Constitutional Amendments' committee bills that makes changes to the Government Code. The bill contains three changes to the PRA at the request of the FPPC and one change to the governance of the CRC at the request of the CRC.

The FPPC provisions:

- Eliminate an obsolete requirement for the FPPC to send a notification to those who subscribe to inform them of bills that would amend the PRA, as Legislative Counsel does this now;
- Fix a drafting error in AB 1170 (Valencia), Chapter 211, Statutes of 2024, that omitted public officials who manage public investments from those who must file their Form 700s electronically; and
- Include local government offices and legislative district offices among the locations where a person cannot receive nor deliver a campaign contribution.

The CRC provision permits, rather than requires, the CRC to fill a vacancy that occurs on the CRC after it completes its redistricting work. The CRC fills vacancies itself and had to do so earlier this year, as last year a member of the 2021 CRC passed away. Under existing law, the CRC had to meet to fill that vacancy, even though it had finished its work in 2022.

When it met, the CRC also voted to request legislation to change the requirement to fill a vacancy to simple authority to do so, when it occurs after a year ending in two. The CRC continues in existence until the next decade's census when a new CRC is formed. The next CRC will form in 2031, so the 2021 CRC remains in existence until then.

Recent Amendments. SB 280 (Cervantes), Chapter 97, Statutes of 2025, would have included local government offices and legislative district offices among the locations where a person cannot receive nor deliver a campaign contribution. SB 280 was

amended to address a different topic. The most recent amendments add the original provisions of SB 280 to this bill.

RELATED/PRIOR LEGISLATION

SB 681 (Allen), Chapter 499, Statutes of 2023, required Legislative Counsel to make available email alerts advising that a bill to amend the PRA has been introduced, referred to committee, voted upon, amended, or acted upon by the governor.

AB 1170 (Valencia), Chapter 211, Statutes of 2024, required a specified list of public officials to file their Form 700s electronically

PRIOR ACTION

Assembly Floor:	78 - 0
Assembly Appropriations Committee:	13 - 0
Assembly Elections Committee:	7 - 0

POSITIONS

Sponsor: California Fair Political Practices Commission
Citizens Redistricting Commission

Support: None received

Oppose: None received

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