

OPINION

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OUR VIEWS

Voters need full picture of donors

Tough penalties needed to force full disclosure of campaign cash.

When voters go to the polls, they deserve to know all the relevant facts about candidates on the ballot. What are their positions? How have they voted? What's their experience?

And then they need to know the most crucial question: Which interest groups and which individuals are bankrolling their campaigns?

Unfortunately, the state's campaign laws don't always make that information available in a way that is easily accessible or timely.

As California Watch, a project for the Center for Investigative Reporting, noted in a recent article, wealthy and politically well-connected donors contributed tens of thousands of dollars to party central committees during the last election cycle. Those committees, in turn, delivered the money to their party candidates.

Because the money does not go directly to candidates, the donor's identity is often obscured and contribution limits ignored.

Proposition 34, California's complex and easily evaded campaign law, makes this sleight of hand legal. Placed on the ballot in 2000 by the state's most powerful politicians and approved by voters, Proposition 34 permits individuals to contribute a maximum of \$3,900 directly to candidates for the state legislature. But under those same rules, donors can contribute eight times as much, or \$32,400, to party central committees in each of California's 58 counties. The committees are then free to pass along those donations to candidates.

It doesn't take a political genius to jump through the loopholes in the law. After contributors max out on their direct contributions, they are encouraged to send more money to party committees. The committees then pass the money on to the contributor's candidate of choice. While the law forbids coordination between central committees and candidates — wink, wink — that coordination happens.

Even more troubling, this practice allows candidates to avoid disclosing the true source of their contributions. As money flows from donor to remote central committee to candidates, too often the link between candidate and donor becomes obscure.

The Fresno County Republican Central Committee got caught up in the funding manipulation and had to pay a fine to the FPPC. It began when San Diego County interests sent \$82,900 to the Fresno County committee last May. The Fresno County GOP then sent San Diego County Assembly Member Joel Anderson \$78,755.

FPPC audits have shown that political committees frequently fail to disclose the money they distribute to candidates.

At minimum, the public should have a right to know who is bankrolling a campaign before they go in the ballot booth. Any candidate who violates disclosure requirements should face stiff penalties — not just the forfeiture of the funds collected and fines paid for by his or her campaign.

These penalties should include personal liability for violations. As the tough-on-crime candidates tell us: If you break the law, you should not be coddled by the system.

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Foundation raises bar for charitable giving

The Fresno Regional Foundation has quietly been improving our community's quality of life by directing donations to local agencies and increasing the level of philanthropic giving. The once struggling foundation now has assets approaching \$50 million and its leaders have pledged to double that in the next five years.

The foundation's work is especially important during an economic period that has left many nonprofit organizations struggling for funding.

The Fresno Regional Foundation was established in 1966, but it wasn't until about five years ago that it saw a rebirth. This didn't happen by accident. The foundation's board and its CEO, Daniel DeSantis, decided it was not meeting its potential, and they set out to make it more visible and attract more donors.

That would allow the foundation to improve the community with strategic giving to agencies that show re-

sults. While the foundation has made strides, DeSantis says his group is on a mission to become an even bigger player in our community.

He wants to develop a culture of philanthropy in the Valley that equals other parts of California. We run behind other regions in charitable giving, and DeSantis believes there are untapped opportunities, even with the region's demographics.

The foundation is making a difference, and evidence is the mark that the organization made on our community in 2009. Grants totaling \$6.8 million were awarded to about 250 agencies, according to DeSantis.

There also are tax advantages for donors who give through the foundation.

We look forward to the next phase of the foundation's work, and applaud the contributions it has already made to our community.

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