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Activists seek to limit outside campaign money

By Christian M. Wade Statehouse Reporter 8 hrs ago



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BOSTON — With tens of millions of dollars in campaign spending expected to flow into Massachusetts next year ahead of ballot questions ranging from a

“millionaires tax” to a \$15-per-hour minimum wage, activists want to limit contributions from out-of-state donors.

Two citizen-driven initiatives that are inching toward the 2018 ballot seek to curb outside money by capping how much can be given to state candidates and ballot initiatives.

One proposal would limit the amount of money raised by out-of-state individuals for or against ballot initiatives and candidates to \$500 per election cycle.

The other would require campaigns and committees to disclose contributions by foreign nationals and businesses in which non-U.S. citizens have a sizable ownership stake.

Both proposals are being reviewed by Attorney General Maura Healey, the first of several hurdles to get a spot on the November 2018 ballot. If Healey certifies the questions, supporters will need to collect 64,750 voter signatures by this Nov. 18.

Nick Bokron, a welder from Nahant and co-founder of Pass Mass Amendment, the group behind the ballot questions, said the goal is to take big money out of politics.

He said controversy surrounding Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election has stoked the public’s fears about foreign influence in contested federal and state races.

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“The timing for it is perfect,” Bokron said. “Everybody is worried about dark money.”

Good-government advocates say the influx of corporate money, coupled with no limits on contributions, means that grassroots campaigns are often outspent by special interests, "hijacking" the democratic process.

"The influence of corporate interests on Beacon Hill is strangling the public referendum process," said Janet Domenitz, executive director of the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group. "Millions of dollars in corporate money is being spent and there's virtually no accountability for how they raise and spend that money."

Bokron's group has also sought a constitutional amendment stating that "corporations are not people" and that the state Legislature can impose limits on political donations. The initiative was in response to the 2010 Citizens United ruling.

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling cleared the way for corporations and unions to pay for political ads made independently of candidates' campaigns. The high court ruled that corporations and labor unions have a First Amendment right to political expression.

Sponsors of the proposals said they aren't sure how much foreign money is finding its way into state elections. Under current federal law, it doesn't have to be disclosed.

Foreign nationals can't contribute directly to candidates running for federal,

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state or local offices. However, under the Citizens United ruling, foreign companies with operations in the country can form political action committees that allow U.S. citizens who work for them to contribute to campaigns and causes.

In the 2016 election, those companies contributed more than \$21 million to federal candidates, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. About \$13 million went to Republicans; an additional \$8 million was given to Democrats, the center said.

Bockron said the prohibition would block companies from donating to super PACs or running political ads if they have a single foreign owner who owns 5 percent or more of the company, or multiple foreign owners who combined own 20 percent or more.

In Massachusetts, the Legislature raised the individual contribution limit two years ago from \$500 to \$1,000 as part of election changes signed by then-Gov. Deval Patrick.

Under state election laws, corporations cannot give directly to candidates but the sky is the limit for political action committees that raise unlimited money for ballot initiatives.

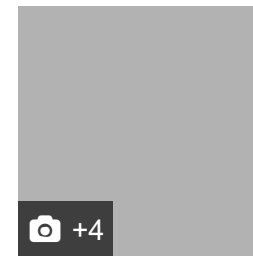
Unlike contributions to candidates, there are no restrictions on donations to committees and corporations often get involved, unleashing a deluge of advertising from special interests, labor unions and other supporters.

If previous elections are an indicator, money will pour into next year's ballot

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campaigns by the millions of dollars, much of it from out-of-state donors and special interests.

Question 2, which unsuccessfully sought to expand the number of taxpayer-funded charter schools, drew the most attention last year, with a combined \$38.9 million collected, according to the state Office of Campaign and Political Finance.

Those contributions included more than \$15.6 million from the New York-based Families for Excellent Schools Advocacy Inc. and \$240,000 from former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a longtime champion of charter schools.

Save Our Public Schools drummed up \$14.7 million in opposition to the question, with the American Federation of Teachers contributing \$1.7 million and the National Education Association giving \$5.5 million.

Following close behind in outside spending was the campaign for and against Question 4, which would legalize marijuana. More than \$9.3 million was spent by supporters and opponents, with much of the money coming from out of state.

The Campaign to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol, the primary committee advocating for legalization, had raised more than \$6.4 million as of Oct. 15, according to state filings. New Approach PAC, a Washington, D.C.-based group with ties to billionaire philanthropist and legalization advocate Peter Lewis, was the biggest contributor at \$2.2 million.

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Nationally, political parties are among the active contributors across state lines.

The Democratic and Republican Governors Associations have pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into state gubernatorial, legislative races and ballot questions in the past decade, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

Several other states — including Connecticut and Washington— are debating legislation to curtail spending by outsiders.

Bokron said he knows the group faces an uphill battle but remains undeterred.

“We don’t have any money or resources but we’re committed to doing this,” he said. “We’re powered by people.”

Christian M. Wade covers the Massachusetts Statehouse for North of Boston Media Group’s newspapers and websites. Email him at cwade@cnhi.com

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