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OPINION

Opinion: Oregonians should not fall for Legislature's fake campaign finance reform

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An initiative petition that backers hope to put on the November ballot appears to have spurred action by the Legislature to come up with its own – but very flawed – limits, the authors write. Beth Nakamura



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We all know that Oregon's system of political campaign financing, in which there are no limits on how much companies, individuals and organizations may donate, is broken. In 2020, Oregon voters overwhelmingly sought to change that dynamic by adopting a constitutional amendment to expressly allow contribution limits. Unfortunately, the Legislature has not stepped up to the challenge, failing to pass any donation caps or disclosure requirements since then.

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So good government groups led by League of Women Voters of Oregon, Honest Elections Oregon, Alliance for Democracy and others have sought to fill the void. We have already gathered 100,000 signatures aimed at getting Initiative Petition 9 – IP 9 – on the November 2024 ballot, which would impose clear caps that help keep the influence of big money to a minimum and require that ads include taglines showing who is paying for them. IP 9 is the result of years of work with state and national experts on campaign finance reform, including Common Cause, Campaign Legal Center, Voters' Right to Know and others.

The threat of our ballot measure, it appears, has prompted action. Labor unions are trying to get a competing, but flawed initiative petition on the same ballot. Their proposal, Initiative Petition 42, even carries a confusingly similar ballot title to IP 9. And legislators have also kicked into gear, with the Oregon House Committee on Rules now considering

House Bill 4024. Developed by the state's biggest corporate and union lobbies, the bill is aimed at derailing the real reforms included in IP 9. The only public hearing so far was rushed only one day after the text of the bill was made public.

This bill, unfortunately, does not curb the excesses built into our current system.

Not only does HB 4024 adopt contribution limits that are double or triple those of IP 9, it also builds in huge loopholes that would allow corporations, unions and others to provide effectively unlimited funds for candidates and ballot measures without revealing their true sources. Among the loopholes in its currently available version:

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- There's almost no disclosure requirements for ads to identify true sources of funds. Ads for candidates would need to include only the name of the candidate. Ads for ballot measures do not have to disclose anything.
- Any two people or entities can create and fund an unlimited number of "membership organizations," which can accept unlimited funds from unlimited sources. The bill allows each to give up to \$66,000 per statewide candidate and \$33,000 per non-statewide candidate during the election year. A membership organization may also donate \$50,000 in an election year to an unlimited number of "multicandidate committees" – political action committees that support or oppose multiple candidates.
- HB 4024 also allows any membership organization to give an enormous amount of "in-kind" services during the election year, such as legal advice, advertising consulting and other professional services worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

- Anyone and any entity can create and fund a “small donor committee” which can contribute huge amounts via a complex formula. Example: a small donor committee with 10,000 donors can contribute \$264,000 to each statewide candidate during the election year and also \$132,000 each to an unlimited number of “multicandidate committees.”
- Democrats and Republicans running for office may receive campaign contributions twice as high as those allowed to minor party candidates.
- Candidates can carry over funds from one election to the next, giving them a huge advantage over new candidates without those war chests.

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These provisions go far beyond the sensible limits offered by our proposal, IP 9, which provides more modest parameters for membership organizations to support candidates by limiting them to \$20,000 in cash and \$20,000 in donated services per candidate during an election year with both a primary and general election. While HB 4024 backers claim these limits are too restrictive, no other state allows any special higher limits for membership organizations. HB 4024, in contrast, would ensure that money continues to flow through the loopholes.

We encourage Oregonians to tell their legislators in Salem that they stand with our coalition of good government groups, which has long shown our commitment to true reform. Don't fall for the false promises of HB 4024, which would only continue to benefit those who want to keep big money in politics.

David Delk, co-chair of Alliance for Democracy Oregon, also contributed to this op-ed.

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1 of 5

Which of the following do you plan to participate in for March Madness? (select all that apply)

- Fill out a bracket for a national online competition
- Place a 'prop bet' on a game, such as Winning Margin
- Bet on the outcome of individual games
- Attend or host a party
- Play in a bracket contest (for money or for fun) with family, friends, or co-workers
- Follow or watch games while at work
- None of the above

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