



June 25, 2013

The Honorable Paul Fong  
Member, California State Assembly and  
Chairman, Assembly Committee on Elections and Redistricting  
California State Capitol, Room 5016  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Assembly Bill 400 – SUPPORT**

Dear Chairman Fong:

The California Voter Foundation (CVF) is pleased to support your bill, Assembly Bill 400, which, if enacted will require state and local initiative campaigns that hire signature gatherers to disclose to voters whose signatures are requested the identities of the five largest donors of \$10,000 or more to the campaign.

Although CVF does not traditionally take positions supporting or opposing legislation, improving disclosure of financial interests in initiative campaigns to help voters make more informed choices is one of our top goals. That's why we have made an exception for AB 400; we believe it is a vitally important piece of legislation and strongly support its enactment.

While California has some of the best campaign finance disclosure laws in the nation, there is always room for improvement, particularly when it comes to initiatives. Due to the way initiatives are processed by the Attorney General and the Secretary of State, it is currently nearly impossible for the public to track the funders behind an initiative while it is in circulation. Without a number yet assigned, there is no internal tracking mechanism established through the Secretary of State's web site that allows the public to match up an initiative in circulation with public disclosure statements.

Even if this data were better integrated by state agencies, it still can be very difficult for the general public to analyze and interpret campaign finance disclosure reports. That's why identifying the top donors is so important – it makes it much easier for voters to quickly determine which interest groups are backing a particular measure if the top donors have already been officially identified. Your bill takes the extra step of ensuring this crucial data is placed before voters at the very time they need it most – when they are asked to sign initiative petitions.

Our initiative process is based on the belief that voters can and should make informed choices. While we have yet to see any interest buy an initiative victory outright, we have seen plenty of examples of interest groups buying their way onto the ballot.

When voters engage in direct lawmaking through the initiative process, they need to have on hand the same kind of intelligence lawmakers rely on when they vote on bills; first and foremost, voters and lawmakers alike need to know who the sponsor of a proposed law is before taking action on it.

While every initiative has a formal “proponent”, this individual’s identity often fails to reveal to the public the true interests of the groups backing the effort. Requiring the top donors to be listed on ballot petitions will give voters exactly the kind of straightforward information they need and, according to repeated public opinion polls, very much want. The Public Policy Institute of California frequently polls Californians about the initiative process and has repeatedly found that improving public disclosure of initiative sponsors is supported by over 80 percent of Californians, with support cutting across political demographics. Democrats, Republicans and independents alike want better disclosure.

That’s why the California Voter Foundation advocates for “publicized disclosure” – it is simply not enough to require committees to report their finances and hope the public will go looking for the data; if we are really committed to educating California voters and helping them make informed voting choices, then we must put that information under voters’ noses, on initiative petitions and in the ballot pamphlet so it is readily available to voters when they are making crucial decisions such as signing a petition or voting on a proposed law.

For more information and analysis from CVF regarding needed improvements to the initiative disclosure process, please see our paper, “Initiative Disclosure Reform and Recommendations”, available on our web site at <http://www.calvoter.org/issues/disclosure/pub/greenliningpaper.pdf>.

Once again, thank you for authoring this important legislation. I look forward to working with your senior committee staffer, Ethan Jones and assisting however we can to help ensure passage and enactment of AB 400.

Sincerely,

Kim Alexander  
President & Founder