

Calif. money flows to super PACs as state lawmakers seek limits

Will Evans - California Watch | Posted: Friday, March 23, 2012 12:05 am

Wealthy Californians are keeping the money flowing to super political action committees, even as some state lawmakers want to turn off the faucet.

Super PACs on the left and right drew hefty contributions last month from the rich and famous - such as controversial comedian Bill Maher and GOP mega-donor Jerry Perenchio - as well as from the merely rich.

Meanwhile, state legislators are pushing bills to curb the proliferation of unlimited money in politics.

The California Assembly yesterday approved a resolution urging Congress to overturn the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The split decision helped give rise to super PACs by allowing unlimited contributions from corporations and unions to attack or support politicians, as long as the committees don't coordinate with candidates. The California bill, [AJR 22](#), is part of a [campaign](#) to pass such resolutions around the country.

A trio of Assembly Democrats introduced another bill this week in an effort to go beyond a purely symbolic resolution. [AJR 32](#) seeks to use a constitutional process whereby two-thirds of state legislatures can force Congress to call a constitutional convention. It calls for a constitutional amendment to declare that money does not equal speech, which would reverse decades of Supreme Court precedent.

"We wanted to do something that actually has effect, that would have the force of law and would be binding on Congress if 33 other states pass resolutions," said Assemblyman Mike Gatto, D-Burbank. "If you equate speech 100 percent to money, then what you're really saying is someone with no money has no speech rights, and that can't be right."

The strategy pursued by Gatto's bill has never succeeded before and probably has no chance, said John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the

Cato Institute. Even if it did work, a constitutional convention could lead to a vastly different amendment than what was originally intended, Samples said.

The notion that money shouldn't equal speech is popular, but could open a Pandora's box of government regulations, he said. "It would be a mistake because essentially what you're doing is giving Congress plenary power over the regulation of speech," he said.

Until then, though, the floodgates are open.

Maher made a splash in February with a \$1 million contribution to Priorities USA Action, a pro-Barack Obama super PAC, and then drew [flak \[PDF\]](#) from conservatives who compared his controversial commentary with that of conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh.

California's other big liberal donor last month was not so famous: Kareem Ahmed of Rancho Cucamonga, gave the super PAC \$500,000. Ahmed, CEO of Landmark Medical Management, said in a statement that he wants to do everything he can to ensure Obama's re-election and battle conservative attack ads.

"President Obama is fighting to help middle class families during tough economic times, to transition our nation to a clean energy future, to fight to keep improving our health care - the list goes on and on," he wrote. "Priorities USA Action has the President's back, and I'm proud to have theirs."

On the other side of the spectrum, American Crossroads, the super PAC affiliated with Karl Rove and other Republican operatives, received \$1 million from Irving Moskowitz, who runs a [controversial casino and bingo hall](#) in Hawaiian Gardens, a small city in Los Angeles County. In the Middle East, Moskowitz is either loved or reviled for [bankrolling](#) Jewish settlements in Arab areas, which critics say has frustrated peace efforts there.

American Crossroads also picked up \$100,000 from [Howard Leach](#), a former longtime UC regent and fundraiser for former President George W. Bush, who appointed him as ambassador to France. Leach was a co-chairman of a fundraising [dinner \[PDF\]](#) in Burlingame for Mitt Romney in December and gave \$100,000 to the pro-Romney super PAC in January.

The group backing Romney, Restore Our Future, received \$500,000 last month from former Univision CEO [Jerry Perenchio](#). Perenchio - who has been [credited](#) with launching Elton John's U.S. career, promoting the famed 1971 heavyweight fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, and co-producing the film "Blade Runner" - also gave \$2 million last year to American Crossroads.

Restore Our Future also brought in \$100,000 from Griff Harsh, neurosurgeon and husband of failed gubernatorial candidate and Hewlett-Packard CEO Meg Whitman. Whitman gave the committee \$100,000 in January.

Other California donors recently added to the ample amounts they've already handed over to Romney's super PAC. Los Angeles developer Geoff Palmer has given a combined \$350,000, as have Susan and Howard Groff, who own [Northwest Excavating](#) in Northridge. [Dick Boyce](#), a Burger King director and partner at private equity giant TPG Capital, added \$100,000 to the \$200,000 he gave last year.

The super PAC backing Newt Gingrich didn't receive any donations from Californians last month. The Red White and Blue Fund, which supports Rick Santorum, received \$50,000 in February from retired hedge fund manager [Richard Barry](#) of San Rafael. Barry's total is now \$100,000.

PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel has bankrolled the super PAC boosting Ron Paul with \$2.6 million so far, but he took the month of February off.

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