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California Considers Tough Campaign-Finance Rules

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California is considering some of the nation's strictest campaign-finance rules, aimed at keeping candidates from coordinating with groups able to raise unlimited amounts of money on their behalf.

The state's Fair Political Practices Commission is scheduled to vote on the proposals Thursday. The rules would apply to statewide and local elections.

The vote comes as outside groups are playing a central role in national campaigns since the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision in 2010. That ruling led to the growth of super PACs, which can raise and spend unlimited amounts in support of candidates, or their opponents, but cannot legally coordinate with candidate campaigns.

Critics of the ruling say campaigns are finding ways around the ban by hiring the same consultants, publicizing campaign strategies and having candidates, or presumptive candidates, fundraise on behalf of the super PACs.

Separately, over the weekend, Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill that makes California the second state after Oregon to automatically register eligible voters at the state Department of Motor Vehicles. Eligible voters will be registered automatically with the state's secretary of state when they apply for, or renew, a driver's license, or when they update their addresses.

Political spending by outside groups on statewide and local elections totaled more than \$80.6 million in California's 2014 election cycle, according to MapLight, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group that tracks money in politics. California officials worry that statewide and local campaigns could increasingly work with outside groups as the 2016 election cycle kicks into gear.

"In the last couple years there has definitely been a lot of coordination," said Galena West, the commission's chief of enforcement. But "proving these cases is really difficult."

The new rules would presume campaigns are coordinating with outside groups if they engage in certain tactics, unless they can prove otherwise to the commission.

A key provision would assume coordination if outside groups employ the same political consultants used by the candidates they back during the same election cycle, a rule similar to ones in place in Connecticut and Maine. Another rule would assume coordination if family members of a candidate work for or are the principal funders of an independent expenditure committee.

Another rule would assume coordination if candidates fundraise for these outside groups, either by asking for money or appearing as a speaker at a group's events.

Other proposed restrictions aim to discourage campaigns from publicly communicating campaign needs to outside groups and disseminating tactics and communications that are reused by these groups, such as ad-buying plans, polls or footage for campaign commercials.

Advocates for stricter regulation of money in politics praised California's proposed changes. "With Congress unable to do much of anything and as the cost of elections goes up—in states and the federal level—we're going to see states leading the way on reforms," said Adam Smith, a spokesman for the group Every Voice, which advocates for public financing of campaigns.

But John Samples, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the prohibition on the use of campaign consultants interferes with the right to free association. More broadly, he said, increased political spending helps engage and educate voters, and the use of outside groups tends to help challengers take on incumbents.

"A voter with more information is not necessarily your best friend as an incumbent," Mr. Samples said.

Some of the tactics targeted by California officials have been most prevalent in national campaigns. Before formally declaring his presidential candidacy, Republican Jeb Bush appeared at fundraisers on behalf of the super PAC Right to Rise USA that now supports him. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) uploaded silent, stock footage of the senator conducting routine activities such as signing papers, shaking hands and sitting with his wife to his YouTube channel. An outside group, Kentucky Opportunity Coalition, later used the images to create commercials supporting him.

If the commission, which has three Democratic appointees and two Republican, adopts the rules they could take effect in four to six weeks. Violators could face a penalty of up to \$5,000 for each violation.