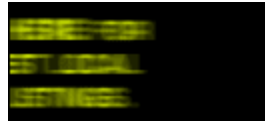




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Campaign-finance reform bill aims to open up process

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Julie Carr Smyth
Plain Dealer Bureau

Columbus - Republican state lawmakers unveiled a campaign-finance reform bill Friday aimed at cleaning up their party's image and the Ohio political process.

The sweeping measure - which opens the books of controversial issue-advocacy groups and secret party operating accounts to full public view - is scheduled to be introduced in both the House and Senate on Monday. That is the day lawmakers begin a special session, on this topic alone, convened by Gov. Bob Taft.

Both Taft and Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, who have jointly advocated many of the bill's provisions since 1999, heaped praise on the long-awaited proposal.

"Gov. Taft wants a bill that exposes every dollar used to affect the political process," said Taft spokesman Orest Holubec. "What was outlined here today gets us there."

Blackwell spokesman Carlo LoParo said, "You'll be hard pressed to contribute to political entities to affect the political process in the future in Ohio without having those dollars disclosed."

State Sen. Randy Gardner and State Rep. Kevin DeWine, the Republicans managing the bill for their chambers, said at a news conference they are hopeful the bill can ease widespread concerns about too much secrecy in Ohio's political process.

DeWine said, "This bill's about transparency in Ohio elections."

Two of the state's top-ranking Republicans - Ohio Treasurer Joe Deters and

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And Ohio caught the national spotlight in 2000 when nasty ads against Supreme Court Justice Alice Robie Resnick, a Democrat, were underwritten by an issue advocacy group whose contributors were not subject to disclosure under current Ohio law.

Not everyone was happy with the 191-page bill.

Critics blasted the plan Friday for ushering in 400 percent increases in political contribution limits; banning issue ads not backed by parties or candidates a month before Election Day; and restricting union political activity.

Senate Democratic Leader Greg DiDonato said raising contribution limits from \$2,500 to \$10,000 will make it impossible for candidates of modest means, like him - or the average Ohioans he represents - to gain political access.

"They might as well legalize prostitution in the Statehouse, because that's what this amounts to," said DiDonato, who represents several upper Ohio Valley industrial counties. "It is going to corrupt our government even more, and give us some of the highest contribution limits in the nation."

Gardner said he has long opposed raising limits, but the compromise is intended to discourage the bundling and money laundering through county party accounts that Ohio has seen with the \$2,500 limit.

AFL-CIO lobbyist Tim Burga said his labor coalition opposes a provision that treats political giving by unions the same as corporations.

"Campaign contributions from labor groups represent only a small part of the overall picture, yet it's the only real avenue for working people to let their voice count," he said. "There's not a working person out there who can afford a \$10,000 contribution."

Bill Todd, a lawyer who represents the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, said the bill's plan to ban issue ads 30 days before the election will hurt the ability of business and other nonaffiliated political players seeking to affect elections.

"Groups as diverse as the Sierra Club, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce and Ohio Right to Life are going to be restricted from communicating their messages during the period when Ohioans are most likely to be listening," he said. "I understand the need for campaign-finance reform, but it's always got to be balanced against the right to political speech."

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