

Idea floated to ban fundraising while lawmakers work

By Torey Van Oot, Sacramento Bee

The concept of banning California lawmakers from fundraising while they're at work has a new cheerleader: a former head of the state's political watchdog agency.

Dan Schnur, a former Republican political consultant who served as chair of the California Fair Political Practices Commission, is launching a new effort to prohibit state legislators and statewide officers from raising cash when the Legislature is in session.

"Fundraising is a legitimate political activity. Legislating is a legitimate political activity. But you can't do both of those things at the same time," Schnur said in an interview last week.

It isn't unusual for lawmakers to leave the Capitol at midday to raise money at a luncheon reception, or ask supporters for campaign cash at off-site fundraisers held before or after a day of votes. They've held 47 such events in Sacramento this month alone, according to notices posted in the Capitol Morning Report newsletter.

Changing that practice, Schnur said, will "weaken the link between political giving and government action."

"Human nature being what it is, a large check written six months before a key vote is simply not going to have the same impact as that same check written 20 minutes before that same vote," he said.

One plan Schnur is floating would mostly end incumbent

fundraising between January and June, and then again in the month of August. The restriction would not apply to challengers.

Fifteen states currently ban campaign contributions while lawmakers are in session, though most meet far less frequently than California's full-time Legislature, according to data collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Schnur, who directs the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC, said he wants to start his effort by working with members of the Legislature and candidates for statewide office, but will consider backing an initiative on the topic if that doesn't work out.

A former GOP strategist who counts Gov. Pete Wilson and presidential candidate John McCain among his past clients, Schnur said he reregistered as an independent after leaving the FPPC in hopes of approaching campaign finance reform "from a space outside of either of the two parties."

Schnur's plan will likely be a tough sell at the Capitol, where lawmakers have been reluctant to change the rules that govern how they run their campaigns. Similar proposals, including bans during the budget votes floated by former GOP Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, have failed to gain traction with California's lawmakers. There are also varying views among advocates of reform.

Bob Stern, a campaign finance expert who has long called for added fundraising restrictions, said he thinks it makes more sense to ban taking contributions in odd-numbered years when no state elections take place. He agrees that limiting the calendar for fundraising could lessen the practice of special interests "giving for access reasons, to curry favor" while the legislators are at work.

"Ninety percent of the money comes from people who want something from the Legislature," said Stern, the former

president of the Center for Governmental Studies. "The more you restrict it in terms of tying it to the Legislature, the better it is and the better it looks in terms of when the money comes in."

Polling suggests that changes to fundraising rules would be a hit with voters. Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California, said such a proposal could tap into voters' concerns with the role of money in politics.

"One of the things that creates a lack of trust in the state government and representative government in California is a belief that there are these few big interests looking out for themselves, have a lot of influence," he said.

But some political operatives say fundraising bans won't solve bigger issues surrounding the rising cost of campaigns and influence of wealthy interests.

Instead, they say, it will shift the timetable for collecting those contributions and possibly force more campaign money into independent expenditure committees that can raise and spend unlimited amounts.

"It's sort of like sticking a finger in a dike," said Steve Maviglio, a Democratic strategist who has worked inside and outside the Capitol. "The water is going to come out somewhere, and the money is going to get to legislators by the time they need it for their campaigns."

Schnur argues that even if it didn't slow the flow of money in state politics, a ban would ensure that legislators stay focused on governing responsibilities while in Sacramento.

"This would actually free up the legislators' time to do the work that they were elected to do," he said.