

Contribution Caps Not a Black-and-White Issue

Written by Rich Miller
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Editorial writers, crusading columnists, and reformers say it all the time: Illinois is one of only a small handful of states that does not regulate campaign contributions.

That's technically true, but you might be surprised at how little some other states actually regulate those contributions.

Governor Pat Quinn's independent reform commission has recommended that Illinois adopt the same basic contribution limits for individuals and political action committees as the federal government. But if contribution limits are supposed to get the influence of money out of politics, they've failed miserably in Washington, DC, where money has become an obsession and that obsession rules all.

According to a March analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), some states have few campaign-contribution restrictions. Still others have much more stringent caps than proposed by the governor's reform commission.

For instance, neighboring Iowa has no limit on individual contributions to candidates and doesn't cap state-party contributions, political-action-committee (PAC) contributions, or labor-union contributions to candidates. However, Iowa does prohibit direct contributions by corporations. Here is a rundown of some other states:

- Texas, Pennsylvania, and North Dakota prohibit direct corporate and union contributions to candidates, but have no limits on any other contributions.
- Indiana restricts contributions by corporations and unions to \$5,000 per year for statewide candidates and \$2,000 per year for all other candidates. Individual, PAC, and state-party contributions are not limited, however. Mississippi and Alabama have similar restrictions.
- Ohio limits individual and PAC contributions to a somewhat odd \$11,395.56 per candidate, per election, while capping state-party contributions to \$642,709.58 for statewide candidates, \$128,200.05 for state-Senate candidates, and \$63,815.14 for state-House candidates. Corporate and labor-union contributions are prohibited.
- According to the NCSL report, 13 states have no caps whatsoever on individual contributions. Even more have no limits on state-party contributions, although some states, such as Kentucky, require that candidates other than gubernatorial candidates accept no more than half of their money from the state parties. Kansas is one of a small number of states that severely restricts state-party contributions during primaries, but imposes no limit on

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general-election spending.

- California's contribution limits are much higher than the proposed federal-style limits here in Illinois, perhaps reflecting its large number of big media markets and the fact that limits are indexed to inflation. California caps individual, union, and corporate contributions at \$25,900 for gubernatorial candidates, \$6,500 for other statewide candidates, and \$3,900 for legislative candidates. PAC contributions are roughly double those limits. But last month, California's Fair Political Practices Commission reported that candidates have still managed to raise almost \$1.1 billion since the caps took effect in January of 2001. That total did not include independent expenditures, which would be a lot more money.

- Florida, another large state with multiple TV markets, has a \$500 across-the-board limit on campaign contributions from all sources. But recent local reporting has shown how easy it is for special interests to get around those caps via "electioneering communications organizations." One example was an alleged scheme by Anheuser-Busch to bankroll favored candidates via a police union fund.

- The state of New York uses a mathematical formula to limit individual, PAC, and union gubernatorial-campaign contributions. New York also has a \$100,000 limit on family-member contributions to legislative candidates. State-party contributions to candidates are prohibited in primaries, and unlimited in general elections. Corporations are limited to \$5,000 per year in aggregate.

- Michigan prohibits all corporate and union campaign contributions and has very low caps for all other contributions. Statewide-candidate contributions are limited to \$3,400 for individuals and many PACs per election cycle. Senate-candidate contributions are capped at \$1,000, and House contributions are limited to just \$500. "Independent" campaign committees have much higher caps.

As you can plainly see, the range of limits is far broader than we are ever told. This issue is not as black and white as it's usually portrayed. I actually favor contribution caps, but they should either be extremely low with lots of safeguards (unlike Florida) to really stamp out the money, or high enough that every check doesn't become an obsession. Illinois Senate Republican Leader Christine Radogno has proposed a \$10,000 cap on individuals and PACs. That seems reasonable to me.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and TheCapitolFaxBlog.com.