

Editorial: Legislators, serve the public, not your donors

By [The Oregonian Editorial Board](#)

Legislators would like Oregonians to believe that the hefty campaign contributions they receive don't affect their voting.

Tens of thousands of dollars in timber industry money had nothing to do with lawmakers' [pressuring state regulators](#) to reverse new wildlife protections that would have restricted logging, they claim. Donations from construction contractors played no role in gutting legislation that would have required those same contractors to [get rid of aging diesel engines](#) in their equipment. The suggestion that it did, a lawmaker scoffed, was "insulting."



Wooden rail ties at the AmeriTies plant in The Dalles are treated with creosote to protect against the elements.

Oregonians would be justified in feeling a little insulted themselves.

As The Oregonian/OregonLive's Rob Davis detailed in his four-part series, "[Polluted by Money](#)," Oregon's campaign finance laws allowing unlimited donations and liberal spending of campaign cash have given corporations an outsized voice in shaping the state's environmental profile. The result: Compared to neighboring states, Oregon has [looser regulations, fewer requirements and lower standards](#) that appear to put corporate objectives above the public's time and again, Davis reported. Despite multiple attempts, legislators have made little progress in curbing harmful diesel emissions blamed for causing as many as 460 premature deaths of Oregonians each year. The state has been unable to pass a bill requiring spill response plans for oil trains – even after the fiery derailment of a train in 2016 near Mosier. With elected officials raking in \$43 million in corporate campaign contributions over a decade – more per capita than any other state – it's no wonder Oregonians might doubt whose best interest lawmakers are protecting.

But legislators have an easy way to show Oregonians that such contributions – from corporations, labor unions and others that routinely give big to protect their interests – are truly unrelated to the positions they take. They can refer to voters a constitutional amendment that expressly permits the setting of campaign contribution limits and allows caps passed by voters in 2006 to finally take effect.

Gov. Kate Brown has said that a constitutional amendment allowing contribution limits is a priority for her. Under a 22-year-old Oregon Supreme Court ruling, previous efforts to cap campaign contributions were viewed as violating the state's free-speech clause. An amendment would resolve that conflict.

But Brown has not indicated what such an amendment should include. And while she addressed a campaign finance committee meeting at the beginning of the session, she has not given her position on either of the referral bills that have received public hearings.

More worrisome was a statement sent by her spokeswoman, Nikki Fisher, that seems to cast the problem of campaign finance in Oregon as limited. "The governor believes that across the country, and in Oregon, a wealthy few seek to unduly influence the electoral process," Fisher wrote in an email.

As Davis' reporting clearly established, it's not just "a wealthy few," who are influencing public policy with their money. The comment seems more of a swipe at Nike co-founder Phil Knight, who donated \$2.5 million to Brown's last Republican opponent, than recognition of how companies, unions, advocacy groups and outsiders are all using Oregon's loose campaign finance laws to their own advantage. It begs the question of whether Brown considers donations from her own backers problematic. New York billionaire Michael Bloomberg gave more than \$2 million to fight a ballot measure that would have barred grocery taxes and contributed \$750,000 to Brown through a gun-safety group he funds. And her focus on the "wealthy few" simply misses the point – driven home over and over by Davis' reporting – of just how broadly this problem of limitless donations and freewheeling spending undermines government policy.

A constitutional amendment is a critical step, not just for capping corporate donations, but also donations from those from labor unions, individuals and organizations as well. While corporations may collectively account for the largest chunk of money, labor unions donated \$11 million over 10 years to legislators alone – nearly all Democrats – comprising a significant portion of their campaign funds.

Just as corporate contributions are arguably driving inaction by legislators on environmental issues, so are labor union donations arguably keeping lawmakers and Brown from tackling much needed reforms to the state's public employee pension system. The massive unfunded liability and leaders' refusal in recent years to adopt legal changes that would help ease the pain defy their responsibility to the public to ensure that tax dollars are going to public services – not pension debt. But once again, it appears that the good of the state takes a backseat to campaign donors.

Legislators have taken up a couple bills proposing an amendment, with the most promising one from Sen. Jeff Golden of Ashland. Among other changes in the works, the bill is expected to be revised to allow campaign contribution limits recently passed by Portland and Multnomah County voters to go into effect. Ideally, however, it would be amended to allow caps passed by Oregon voters in 2006 to take effect.

A lot can still go wrong. Lawmakers – who directly benefit from our big-money system – failed to pass referrals in previous sessions, notes Dan Meek, an attorney and [longtime campaign finance reform advocate](#). Or, he said, they may refer a weak amendment that leaves too much power in the Legislature's hands to set the caps.

But the momentum is there. This is what voters want, as they showed with overwhelming support for the campaign finance reform measures in Portland and Multnomah County. It's what Oregonian/OregonLive readers want, as shown by their strong response to Davis' reporting.

Now, it's up to elected officials: Is this what they want? If they understand their duty to Oregonians, then the answer must be yes. Legislators and Gov. Brown: serve the public, not your donors.

- *The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board*

Oregonian editorials

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