

Gov. Brown signs bill to increase ethics, tax agencies' audit power



A law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday gives California ethics and tax agencies more power to conduct campaign finance investigations. (Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press / May 29, 2013)

By Melanie Mason

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SACRAMENTO -- California's ethics and tax agencies now have more power to conduct campaign finance investigations under a law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday.

The law gives the Fair Political Practices Commission and the Franchise Tax Board the ability to begin audits, before an election occurs, of campaigns suspected of illegal activities, even if campaign statements or finance reports have not yet been filed.

It also explicitly allows the commission to seek an injunction in Superior Court to compel disclosure.

Brown signed the bill, AB 800, into law "to strengthen the public's right-to-know in California political campaigns," said Jim Evans, a spokesman for the governor.

Assemblyman Rich Gordon (D-Menlo Park), the bill's author, said the measure improves the commission's effectiveness in the current campaign finance landscape, particularly the increasing involvement of nonprofit groups in elections spending. The law makes changes to the Political Reform Act, a 1974 initiative that set rules for disclosure of money in politics.

"This bill will give the FPPC the tools to make sure voters get what they asked for when they approved the Political Reform Act," Gordon said.

Erin Peth, executive director of the Fair Political Practices Commission, hailed the law as "a big step towards ensuring that campaign laws are followed before the election, when it matters."

Opponents had argued the measure gave the commission too much authority during the election season. Jason Kaune, president of the California Political Attorneys Assn., [said last month](#) that the measure allows the agency to "insert itself into the political process before an election and before an alleged violator has even filed a disclosure form."

The bill, which required a two-thirds vote, cleared the Legislature last month, in the narrow window when Democrats had a supermajority in both houses. Getting that timing right was crucial, Gordon said.

"In this business, there's a variety of factors," Gordon said. "You've got to have good policy, you've got to work your legislation, and you've got to sometimes be lucky."

Another campaign finance measure by Sen. [Lou Correa](#) (D-Santa Ana) was blocked in the Senate after Democrats lost their supermajority there. On Thursday, Correa said he [would amend the bill](#) in hopes of attracting some Republican lawmakers.