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ON POLITICS IN THE GOLDEN STATE

California secretary of state candidates clash at forum

By Patrick McGreevy
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SACRAMENTO – Energized by Capitol scandals, four candidates for California secretary of state clashed in a forum Wednesday over which one is best suited to restore voter faith in state government.

Candidates [Alex Padilla](#), Dan Schnur, Pete Peterson and Derek Cressman also criticized each other’s ideas for reducing the corrupting influence of big money in state government. Three other candidates were not invited to participate in the forum by the Sacramento Press Club.

With three senators suspended while facing criminal charges and his campaign holding a big lead in fundraising, Democratic Sen. Padilla found himself the target of attacks from the other candidates who said his proposals for tougher ethics rules are too little, too late.

“What took you so long?” asked Schnur, noting that Padilla’s proposals come at the end of his eight years in the Senate.

Added Peterson, “It’s a little odd that after eight years in the Senate you are now proposing legislation that you are not actually going to have to abide by.”

Padilla said the latest crop of four bills he is proposing are in response to the arrest of three colleagues, which he said “have increased public attention to the dynamics” of fundraising and have provided “a unique window of opportunity” in the Capitol for getting such bills passed.

Padilla has proposed a three-month blackout on campaign fundraising at the end of each legislative session, which he said “creates a separation between the legislative activity and the political activity.”

Schnur, a no-party-preference candidate who pledges to be the state's "reformer in chief," said Padilla's proposal is inadequate.

The former chairman of the state Fair Political Practices Commission, Schnur has proposed a ban on fundraising during the whole legislative session, saying only that broader step will succeed in "weakening the link between political giving and government action."

However, Peterson and Cressman questioned the effectiveness of such bans, saying contributors can still pledge donations during the session but deliver them later.

"They can work around it," said Peterson, the Republican executive director of the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership, a think tank at Pepperdine University. He noted that four of the six contributions provided by an undercover [FBI](#) agent to Sen. [Leland Yee](#) before Yee's indictment came while the Legislature was in recess.

Cressman, a Democrat and former director of the watchdog group Common Cause, called for Congressional action to overturn the Citizens United court decision that lifted limits on corporate spending in elections, and he proposed more public financing of campaigns.

"We need to get the big money out of politics, not just reschedule it," Cressman said.