

# Ohio Senate GOP budget bill would loosen state's ban on political spending by corporations, unions

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Language tucked into Ohio Senate Republicans' new state budget plan would eliminate the state's ban on corporations and labor unions making independent expenditures for or against political candidates, as well as end contribution limits to independent dark-money groups.

At the same time, the budget bill would also impose new limits on contributions to ballot-issue campaigns, which Democrats have used during the past couple years to pass liberal policies despite GOP dominance over state government.

The proposed changes, which still have a ways to go before becoming law, come as state lawmakers [have done nothing](#) over the past five years to strengthen state ethics or campaign-finance laws in response to the House Bill 6 scandal.

In that scandal, the FirstEnergy corporation gave \$60 million in bribes via a network of dark-money groups to then-Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder and his political allies.

If the Senate GOP budget becomes law, corporations like FirstEnergy would be able to spend a similar amount of money to support or oppose state lawmakers like Householder (a Perry County Republican who's now serving a 20-year prison sentence for his role in the HB6 scandal) was -- so long as the cash goes to groups that only make independent expenditures and don't send any money to campaigns, political parties, and partisan caucus funds.

In that case, prosecutors successfully argued there was a quid pro quo agreement in which FirstEnergy transferred money to Householder and his political operation in exchange for passing the bill.

The alterations would bring Ohio law into line with federal election law following [the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in Citizens United v. FEC](#), which overturned federal bans on corporations and unions making independent expenditures and advocating for the election or defeat of specific candidates.

But state Sen. Kent Smith, a Euclid Democrat, said the budget proposal would open the door to another HB6 scandal in Ohio.

“On the heels of the largest bribery and money laundering scandal in Ohio history, this budget will just make sure that bribery and money laundering is no longer illegal,” Smith said.

The change, if passed, could also work against Republicans, as labor unions (which, with notable exceptions, are traditionally aligned with Democrats) would also be permitted to spend unlimited money on independent expenditures.

At the same time, the Senate’s budget bill would make ballot-issue campaigns abide by the same limits on incoming and outgoing contributions that campaigns have to follow, including a maximum donation limit of \$16,615.67 per person.

Right now, ballot-issue campaigns have no contribution or spending limits.

This isn’t be the first time legislative Republicans have moved to restrict ballot-issue spending after Ohio voters passed measures in 2023 to legalize recreational marijuana and enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution.

Last year, GOP lawmakers passed a bill in a special session to expand the state’s ban on political contributions from foreign nationals to include ballot-issue campaigns. That legislation came in response to billionaire Hansjörg Wyss, a Swiss citizen who lives in Wyoming, giving millions of dollars to a dark-money group that [helped Democrats score the ballot wins](#).

When Senate President Rob McColley, a Northwest Ohio Republican, was asked Wednesday afternoon for the rationale behind the proposed campaign-finance changes, he referred comment to the Senate Republicans’ legal counsel.

“Off the top of my head, I’m not familiar with the subject matter,” McColley said.

Senate GOP spokesman John Fortney, asked to comment, said in a statement Wednesday, “This change in the law would provide full disclosure, transparency, and accountability regarding where contributions are coming from.”

The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com has reached back out to Fortney following McColley’s comments.

The proposed changes come as Republican state lawmakers are also looking at overhauling how campaign-finance violations and other elections complaints are handled.

Right now, such cases are handled by the Ohio Elections Commission, but [several Republican lawmakers have complained](#) that the commission moves slowly and is largely toothless.

Under both the Ohio House's budget bill and the Senate's initial budget draft, the commission would be abolished. Instead, under the Senate's bill, the Ohio secretary of state's office would hear accusations of election-related violations.

The Senate's budget plan would also create a new five-member Ohio Election Integrity Commission, made up of appointees from the secretary of state and the top Republican and Democrat in each legislative chamber, to hear appeals.