

Term limit backers direct focus on politicians' perks

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SACRAMENTO -- Groups who want to sink a ballot measure that would loosen term limits are planning an all-out assault on legislators, calling them out for junkets, per diem allowances, lobbyist gifts and other perks they enjoy on top of their \$113,098 salaries.

Led by U.S. Term Limits, a Washington-based group, the coalition is pushing two initiatives: one to ban legislators' \$162 tax-free daily allowances, and another that would ban gifts from special-interest groups. Both imply lawmakers are taking advantage of the system and seek to undermine any argument that they deserve more time in office.

"One of our priorities is to inform the electorate about what is happening in Sacramento, what politicians are up to," said Kevin Spillane, a spokesman for U.S. Term Limits and a Republican consultant. "We will do everything possible to shine the bright light of attention on legislators and abuses that occur."

The tactic follows a formula that led to term limits in 1990, when proponents rode to victory on an FBI corruption investigation and ensuing indictment of a dozen lobbyists, staff members and legislators.

"The idea is to recreate a sense of scandal in a Legislature that hasn't been rocked by scandal," said Thad Kousser, a political science professor at UC San Diego and a proponent of loosening term limits to allow legislators to develop more experience. "It never hurts to remind voters of some of the things they don't like about legislators."

The current law limits legislators to six years in the Assembly, eight in the Senate and 14 total. The new initiative, which supporters hope to place on the Feb. 5 ballot, would allow lawmakers to serve only 12 years total, but all 12 or any combination could be served in either house.

By a 58-42 percent margin, voters rejected a previous effort to change the law five years ago despite supporters outspending opponents \$10 million to \$1 million. Spillane would not say how much U.S. Term Limits expects to raise this time around, but predicted more money will be spent on both sides.

Proponents, however, believe something important has changed since that defeat five years ago: the public's perception of lawmakers.

Since 2003, public approval of the Legislature has improved from a record-low 19 percent to 42 percent, according to the Field Poll. It helps that no major scandal has recently plagued the Legislature, and that the Democratic-controlled Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger have worked cooperatively since last year.

"The Legislature and the governor are actually in fairly good standing with the public," said Field Poll director Mark DiCamillo.

Opponents will counter with an emphasis on lawmaker perks they hope will strike a chord at a time of high gas prices and tough economic times: per diems, state-issued cars, gas cards, and free car maintenance and rentals.

Legislators receive \$162 every day they're in session -- roughly \$30,000 as year -- for living expenses.

Critics say fundraisers at swanky golf courses in Pebble Beach and Carlsbad, hosted by special-interest groups such as AT&T and the prison guard union, add to an image of lawmakers living the high life.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, whose political consultant is running the campaign for the term limits proposal, called his profession "honorable" and vowed to fight "all the way" against the outside groups funding the opposition.

"Some people want to kick the Legislature around," Nunez said. "But the good thing is voters are starting to ... give credit where credit's due. We're doing some good things, and at least in Sacramento, bipartisanship is working."

Legislators could get a boost if they can enlist Schwarzenegger to campaign for the term limits initiative -- which he might do if the Legislature hands over the power to draw district boundaries to an independent commission.

But term limits supporters say the issue has been settled.

"When Nunez was elected, he knew the rules," said Lou Uhler, president of the Roseville-based National Tax Limitations Committee, and co-author of the 1990 term limits initiative. "He wouldn't have had an open seat to run in if not for term limits. It's a subversion of the rules."

Polls show the public is of two minds on term limits: About two-thirds say they support term limits, but a majority say they would support allowing legislators to spend more time in a single chamber -- as long as their overall potential time in office is reduced from 14 years to 12.

The ambiguity over how the initiative should be presented to voters led to a lawsuit by opponents, who argued the Attorney General's title and

summary wrongly emphasized the reduction from 14 years to 12. They say the majority of legislators actually will see an increase in time, since most Assembly members aren't elected to the Senate, where there are half as many seats.

More than 40 current legislators who would otherwise be termed out after this year could remain if the initiative is approved, including Nunez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland.

Friday, a Sacramento Superior Court judge ruled against U.S. Term Limits, but the group promised to appeal.

While a substantial number of current lawmakers would see their careers extended by loosening term limits, not all agree on the approach. Nunez is backing a separate initiative, but others would like to see term limits included with other reforms.

Sen. Roy Ashburn, R-Bakersfield, is pushing a measure that would ban gifts and require greater reporting requirements on political contributions, while also reforming redistricting and term limits. Perata appears to support such an approach.

Schwarzenegger has called for fundraising blackouts, banning contributions to lawmakers and the governor during certain times.

But, as long as term limits are in the mix, opponents will portray lawmakers as self-serving. Going after their per diem expenses and lobbyist gifts, observers said, will reinforce that image.

"The idea is that you are confirming existing beliefs," said Shanto Iyengar, director of Stanford University's Political Communications Lab. "People are more willing to respond when they agree with you. And their prior beliefs toward politicians are negative and cynical."

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