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Common

Cause's

Major Test

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LOS ANGELES—The billboards and the television screens of California are blossoming with the slogans of a referendum battle more intense than either of the gubernatorial primaries. The battle may have an important bearing on the national pattern of post-Watergate reforms and the future of John Gardner's Common Cause organization.

California Common Cause and a number of other public interest groups are pushing for the passage of Proposition 9 on the June 4 ballot. It is a long, comprehensive piece of campaign spending, lobbying and conflict-of-interest legislation—placed on the ballot by 325,000 signatures after sponsors decided that two reform bills passed by the last session of the legislature were inadequate.

Its terms are much tougher than anything now contemplated in national legislation—tougher, especially, on incumbents in public office and the lobbyists who seek to influence them. Spending limits are strict and, unlike proposed federal laws, Proposition 9 allows incumbents 10 per cent less spending than their challengers, while sharply curtailing their use of newsletters and other perquisites of office.

For lobbyists, Proposition 9 prescribes full financial disclosure to an independent enforcement agency, a \$10 per month limit on spending on any state official, and a flat ban on giving or influencing any campaign donations.

That last provision, especially, has brought down the wrath of the state's biggest AFL-CIO officials, John Henning and Sig Arywitz, who claim the ban on elected union officials' handling both campaign contributions and legislative representation would put them out of business in Sacramento.

Organized labor has joined forces with its traditional enemies, the State Chamber of Commerce, and the business groups to oppose the measure. The opposition elements have the tacit support of most of the elected officials

in both parties—many of whom find it politic to stay publicly neutral.

Both sides are fighting an all-out battle, whose ultimate cost is expected to top \$1 million. Opponents of the proposition have hired the famed Whitaker and Baxter public relations firm to build a campaign around the "Save Free Speech" slogan.

Common Cause is blasting back with ads that catalogue the labor and business organizations allied against the measure, and then say: "All these groups say Proposition 9 is tough on corruption. Isn't that a shame?"

But the stakes go beyond California's borders. Gardner and his allies believe that if the stringent provisions of Proposition 9 become law in California, a standard will be set against which all other state and national legislation can be measured.

On the other hand, Michael Walsh, the San Diego lawyer who heads California Common Cause, concedes that "if you can stop reform by direct vote of the people here, you tell the special interests everywhere, it's business as usual, despite Watergate."

The outcome of this battle will decide more than the course of the post-Watergate reforms. At root, this is a power struggle between the organizations that have been most influential in the political process until now—business and organized labor—and the organization, Common Cause, that is moving most aggressively to challenge them.

It is not accidental that labor and business have become unaccustomed allies in this fight. For the first time, both realized their power is being challenged by that "upstart" citizens' group. Already, Proposition 9 has provoked an angry split within Common Cause's national board, with Howard Samuel of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers—one of the few labor men prominent in Gardner's organization—saying, "I'm not sure I belong here."

In its first three years, Gardner's organization has developed more muscle in Congress than skeptics ever expected. It helped kill the seniority system in the House and it helped break a Senate filibuster to pass the public campaign finance bill it had largely drafted.

But Proposition 9 is the first time Common Cause has been willing to test its strength at the polls—among the voters. The decision to make the test here and now was not casual. California is by far the largest membership state for Gardner's group. And it is here that his top deputy, former United Auto Workers official Jack Conway, has put together the pilot model of the state political organizations he hopes to create all across the country.

If California Common Cause whips the combined forces of labor and business to pass Proposition 9, it can legitimately claim to be what its critics have long accused Gardner of wanting—the strongest new political machine.

But if Common Cause fails here, the bubble may burst for the self-styled citizens lobby.

Both sides know they are playing for keeps.