

With many valuable gifts, lobbyists exerting undue influence

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**By Jared Polis and Pete Maysmith
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Did you know that lobbyists in Colorado are allowed to give gifts to public officials they lobby? Not only is it legal, it is commonplace. In 2005 alone, gifts from lobbyists worth more than \$200,000 went to state legislators and the governor! This November, Colorado voters have the opportunity to end this practice and to clean up government by passing Amendment 41.

Ethics violations erode public trust in government. At the federal level, we saw the bribery scandal involving former Rep. Randall "Duke" Cunningham and the conviction of former Illinois Gov. George Ryan. Closer to home, ethical concerns arose in the most recent session of the Colorado General Assembly. These incidents and the ever-increasing power of special interests and their lobbyists can compromise the integrity of our democratic process.

To restore trust in government, it is crucial to adopt common-sense, meaningful restrictions that protect the public interest from the excessive and corrupting influence of special interests. That is why Coloradans for Clean Government support Amendment 41 - a measure that will strengthen public confidence in the state's political process by banning lobbyist gifts to public officials and establishing a cooling-off period before former elected officials can lobby their former colleagues.

Here in Colorado, special interests are spending enormous resources to influence public policy decisions, fueling an unprecedented expansion of the lobbying business. According to the Center for Public Integrity, in 2005, lobbyists in Colorado were paid \$22.1 million to influence legislation - a whopping 191 percent increase in a decade.

In turn, lobbyists spend about \$1.6 million annually on gifts, entertainment and other expenses to influence state legislators and other public officials.

When lobbyists wine and dine public officials and give them expensive gifts, they gain a level of access that most Coloradans do not have. To level the playing field and protect the public interest, we believe it is time for Colorado to join the majority of states and establish a clear framework for ethics in government by:

- Banning lobbyist gifts and meals to public officials.
- Establishing reasonable restrictions on gift-giving from nonlobbyists.
- Preventing state legislators and statewide elected officials from becoming lobbyists for hire for two years after leaving office.
- Creating a five-member independent ethics commission.

A few opponents of Amendment 41 are making dramatic and false claims about this initiative and how it will apply in various circumstances. Some of this criticism is simply misinformed. Amendment 41 has ample protections to ensure that it will be applied reasonably.

Other opponents, unfortunately, are intentionally distorting Amendment 41 as a smoke screen to hide their real concern - that the Ethics in Government Initiative will put an end to the culture of gift-giving, expensive meals and trips that undermine the public's faith in their public servants.

Let us be as clear as we can in response to these unwarranted and misleading scare tactics. Amendment 41 will not prevent government employees or their children from receiving gifts, favors, meals or other common courtesies from friends, neighbors and acquaintances. Amendment 41 will not prevent donations to a fund established for the benefit of an injured firefighter or other government worker, or his or her family. Amendment 41 will not prevent a government employee or his or her child from receiving a scholarship or grant.

But here's where we do disagree with opponents of this reform measure: We do believe that Amendment 41 will and should prevent, for example, the pharmaceutical industry from creating a bogus "scholarship" for the child of an elected

official to circumvent the gift restriction. These are reasonable and logical distinctions that are being purposefully ignored by critics of Amendment 41.

One of the strengths of this initiative is the flexibility it offers the legislature and the ethics commission to define and clarify terms so that its implementation, as the initiative states, ensures that public officials and employees "avoid conduct that is in violation of their public trust or that creates a justifiable impression among members of the public that such trust is being violated."

Coloradans' overwhelming response to our petition signature drive and the growing coalition of organizations supporting the Ethics in Government initiative demonstrate that the citizens of this state are hungry for meaningful ethics reform.

By approving Amendment 41, Coloradans will take an important step toward cleaning up government in Colorado.

Jared Polis is an entrepreneur, founder of an education-focused foundation and vice-chair of the Colorado State Board of Education. Pete Maysmith is national director of state organizations and campaigns with Common Cause.

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