

Restoring faith in our government

Guest Commentary

By Jared Polis and Mark Larson

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Coloradans are fed up with the corrupting influence of all the freebies and cozy relationships and question whether public officials are fighting for their interests or for special interests.

A growing number of ethics violations at all levels of government are further eroding public trust in government, which is already low. The Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal, the bribery of former Congressman "Duke" Cunningham and the conviction of former Illinois Gov. George Ryan are some of the most recent incidents that, combined with the ever-increasing power of special interests and their lobbyists, contribute to the public's growing mistrust of government.

Special interests are financing a lobbying boom in Colorado, with 11 lobbyists per legislator. According to the Center for Public Integrity, the amount Colorado lobbyists earn has tripled in a decade to \$22.1 million a year. Lobbyists spend \$1.6 million annually on gifts, entertainment and other expenses to influence officials.

In 2005, they doled out hand-held computers, Broncos tickets, expensive meals, international travel and other freebies worth more than \$200,000.

Coloradans are fed up with the corrupting influence of all the freebies and cozy relationships and question whether public officials are fighting for their interests or for special interests. To restore trust in government, it is crucial to have in place common-sense, meaningful restrictions that protect the public interest: 26 states ban or restrict lobbyist gifts, 27 states require a cooling-off period before former public officials can lobby their former colleagues and 39 states have ethics commissions. But Colorado does not prohibit or restrict lobbyist gifts to public officials, does not have a "revolving door" provision and lacks an ethics commission.

That is why Coloradans for Clean Government supports Amendment 41. The Ethics in Government Initiative raises ethical standards by:

- Banning lobbyist gifts to public officials;
- Establishing reasonable restrictions on gift-giving from non-lobbyists;
- Preventing state legislators and statewide elected officials from becoming paid lobbyists for two years after leaving office; and
- Creating an independent ethics commission.

A group of lobbyists who do not like the lobbyist gift ban are using scare tactics to deflect attention from the real impact of Amendment 41: higher ethical standards for a cleaner government. They're fabricating concerns, using bogus examples and quoting language out of context.

This ethics initiative does not restrict scholarships, research grants, funds for injured firefighters or anything provided to a government employee or family member that has no reasonable connection to influencing a public decision.

Amendment 41 has a clearly stated purpose: to "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; any effort to realize personal financial gain through public office other than compensation provided by law is a violation of that trust."

So what's an example of a gift that might be subject to Amendment 41? Every day, hundreds of thousands of Coloradans of all ages step into an elevator with the expectation that they will be safe. It is the responsibility of local governments, through their own employees or through contract workers, to inspect those elevators and to close them down if they do not meet acceptable standards of safety. A gift from a building owner to an inspector most likely would be subject to Amendment 41. And we're glad it would be.

The opposition's increasingly silly argument that Amendment 41 will be applied in outrageous ways is wrong. Unfortunately, it's easier to raise fears through misinformation than to assuage fears with accurate information.

Amendment 41 purposefully does not define gifts and various terms, allowing the legislature to eliminate any misinterpretations through enabling legislation. And the built-in checks and balances of the ethics commission's makeup will ensure that rules are fair and sensible.

By approving Amendment 41 this November, Colorado will take an important step toward restoring faith in government.

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