

Endorsement: Amendment 41 is a blueprint for ethics

The measure would restrict gifts from lobbyists to officials and employees of state and local governments. We urge voters to approve it on Nov. 7.

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Influence peddling has captured all too many headlines this year with prosecutions that rocked Congress, disgracing several lawmakers and bringing infamy to a lobbyist named Jack Abramoff. But is there a risk in Colorado that needs a remedy?

The state hasn't suffered a scandal, but experts on government recognize that some of the ingredients are there: lax regulation, an unusually high percentage of lobbyists to lawmakers, and lots of money already being spent to influence policy or win contracts.

When Colorado's 100 state lawmakers gather each year under the Capitol's gold dome, more than 1,000 paid lobbyists are there to bend their ears. Lobbyists lavish officials with gifts - about \$1.6 million a year, ranging from Broncos tickets to golf outings to overseas trips, according to their filings with the secretary of state's office.

However, when state lawmakers and Gov. Bill Owens reported the gifts they received last year, the total came to \$200,000 - an average \$1,170 for each state senator and \$1,500 for each representative. That's because statutes are squishy about what lobbyists must report, and what lawmakers must report.

Colorado has the fourth-highest number of lobbyists per legislator in the country, with 11 for every legislator, according to Coloradans for Clean Government. Perhaps that's because Colorado is one of 24 states that neither bans nor limits lobbyists' gifts to public officials. (State lawmakers just this year finally voted to prohibit themselves from accepting unlimited amounts of cash.)

Amendment 41 would create an ethics blueprint for state and local government.

The measure would ban lobbyists from giving gifts or meals worth more than \$50 to state and local officials and employees or members of their immediate families. The measure also would close the "revolving door" that allows just-retired lawmakers to lobby former colleagues by requiring a two-year cooling-off period.

Amendment 41 is a proposed constitutional amendment. We'd prefer that these ethics provisions be passed into statute by the legislature, but relevant bills have been killed - and quickly - in recent years.

We urge voters to approve 41.

Opponents have raised some theatrical concerns - that the ban could prohibit school scholarships for children of janitors and other non-policymaking employees, for one example, or criminalize an auto dealer's recreation league sponsorships, for another. We're confident no one will interpret the amendment in that way, and even if they did, 41 creates an ethics commission that would surely reject such frivolous claims.

It's essential that voters not demonize lobbyists or interfere with their legitimate work. Interest group representatives play an invaluable role in the process of government, providing information and perspective. They are often more familiar with state and local issues than part-time lawmakers and harried government employees.

We know there's a likelihood lobbyists will find loopholes in Amendment 41, but it still would create an obstacle to abuse and temptation and bring clarity to proper behavior.

If approved, state lawmakers will polish it with implementing language. Their best efforts will reduce the prospect of frivolous or over-reaching claims.

Most states don't crack down on gift-giving until beset by scandal. With Amendment 41, we say, why wait?

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