



Ethics in government Amendment 41 deserves a 'yes' vote

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Lawmakers worldwide are notorious for their willingness to accept "gifts" from lobbyists. And for all their relative cleanliness in the doing-bidding department, Colorado lawmakers are really no different - they are human, after all.

But accepting a gift from someone who is or wants to be your friend is different than doing so from someone who would like you to pass laws that might benefit them or their company's bottom line. Accordingly, it can only be in the public's best interest to ban the practice of gift-giving - and gift-accepting - among lobbyists and elected or appointed officials.

Amendment 41 would do that, as well as settle two other potentially unsettling elements of state politics: It would establish an independent ethics commission to review allegations of wrongdoing, and it would require legislators to wait two years after leaving office before lobbying their former colleagues. These two provisions will do the most to clean up what mess there is, or could someday be, in state government.

State Rep. Mark Larson, R-Cortez, who is leaving office in December because of term limits, is an outspoken proponent of Amendment 41. As a proven advocate of true representative government, Larson has decided his votes by considering their impact on his constituents ahead of party influence or lobbyists. He has not accepted gifts, meals or other perks from lobbyists, and therefore has been able to make decisions without feeling beholden to anyone.

Other legislators were not so squeaky clean, and while most often the connection between gifts and votes is rarely provable - even when it exists - the fact the legislators accepted \$300,000 in gifts, meals, trips and sporting event tickets in 2005 had to have some effect. Larson's model behavior, which would be made mandatory by Amendment 41, would take the gray area out of the equation.

As someone who is likely looking for a post-Legislature job, Larson will be personally affected by the two-year "cooling-off period" mandated by 41. His support of the measure regardless is a testament to his principles; voters would be well-served to expect those same principles of all their elected officials - and those whom they appoint.

What is most appealing about Amendment 41 is the ethics commission it would establish. Currently, the Legislature has to deal with its own bad behavior - a situation that ranges from uncomfortable to inappropriate. In the 2006 session, there were ethics issues on both sides of the aisle that required ethics committees in both chambers to review accusations. While the committee members certainly appeared to take their jobs seriously, an independent commission would be more appropriate.

Amendment 41 would place its requirements in the Colorado Constitution, which is also appropriate. The amendment provides a governmental framework, and as such, belongs in the state's framing document. Also, legislators like goodies and perks; if Amendment 41 were a statutory measure, it would be open to legislative tinkering. Placing it in the Constitution protects it from being quietly watered down.

Mark Larson has been an excellent representative for Southwest Colorado, in large part because he has kept the interests of his community in the driver's seat. His support of Amendment 41 should tell voters that the measure is in their best interests.

Vote "yes" on Amendment 41.