

Campaign finance law

Alaska voters should say yes to campaign finance reform -- again

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Measure 1 on the Aug. 22 primary election ballot might well be called the "Campaign Finance Reform -- Again" initiative. It would restore lobbying rules and campaign donation limits the Legislature and Gov. Frank Murkowski gutted in 2004. Voting yes on Measure 1 would cut the financial influence of special interests and give ordinary citizens a more equal voice in Alaska politics.

Two years ago, legislators and the governor cut huge holes in Alaska's election and lobbying laws, which used to be some of the tightest in the nation. The changes exempted most business and organization executives who lobby from registering and reporting on their arm-twisting activities. Those lobbyists can now spend up to 40 hours a month directly contacting public officials without reporting it -- a standard so high, some professional lobbyists with multiple clients might not even meet it.

In addition, a lobbyist who is freed of registration requirements is freed from tight fundraising restrictions. Registered lobbyists can only give to candidates in their own district; unregistered lobbyists can hand out campaign cash to any legislators or candidates. By closing the reporting loopholes, Measure 1 would shine more light on lobbyists' activities and limit their fundraising clout.

Legislators and Gov. Murkowski also changed the law to let donors give as much money as they want to political parties. When one party controls the governor's office or Legislature, special interests can hand the party huge sums of money in hopes of buying favorable treatment. It's a tempting situation, and it's potentially corrupting. Measure 1 says a party couldn't accept any individual donations of more than \$5,000.

Measure 1 also would restore the tighter caps on contributions that an individual candidate would be allowed to accept: \$500 from individuals and \$1,000 from groups. It's a move that would make campaigns more democratic. The lower caps would require candidates to raise more money from ordinary citizens.

Legislators and Gov. Murkowski also made it easier for politicians to hide their financial dealings. Officials are now free to take up to \$5,000 in "consulting" contracts without having to reveal who is paying them or what they do for the money. Measure 1 would put the threshold for disclosing those contracts back where it used to be, at \$1,000.

Opponents of Measure 1 say it actually would protect incumbents by making it harder for challengers to raise money. That claim defies common sense. Incumbents are the ones who amass huge sums to scare off challengers. Holding down donation limits helps level the playing field at election time. It helps give voters a real choice.

A spate of scandals at the national level, along with ethics controversies in Alaska, have angered many voters. One constructive way to express that anger is to vote for Measure 1 next Tuesday.

BOTTOM LINE: Remind politicians that they work for you, not for big-money special interests. Vote for Measure 1.