

[Subscribe / Customer Care](#)[Electronic Edition](#)[Web Feeds](#)[Email Newsletters](#)[Home > Opinion](#)[guest commentary | denver](#)

## Campaign rule is good policy

By Mike Coffman

Article Last Updated: 04/12/2007 08:08:28 PM MDT

[Print](#)

In 2002, Coloradans sent a clear message that they wanted big money out of politics. Amendment 27, the campaign finance law, passed with 66 percent voter approval, expressing the concern that large, anonymous campaign contributions may corrupt our political process.

The law attempted to reduce the influence of wealthy individuals, corporations and special-interest groups by reducing the amount they could contribute - and by prohibiting contributions from corporations and labor unions - to candidate committees and political parties. But since Amendment 27 was passed, special interests have continued to look for ways around the law, and they have found a useful vehicle in "small donor committees."

The committees were created by Amendment 27 to encourage small, individual campaign contributions. Small donor committees may accept up to \$50 per individual per year, and then contribute to campaign committees 10 times the limit that individuals must adhere to. A group of neighbors or a coalition of business owners, for example, may form a small donor committee to support or oppose a candidate or issue. Large organizations, such as unions, also form small donor committees for their members.

But some large organizations use small donor committees to circumvent the goals of our campaign finance laws. A review of small donor committee financial reports filed from 2003 to February 2007 reveals that these committees reported more than \$7.3 million in contributions. The vast majority came from 12 membership organizations - all labor groups - and almost this entire amount (\$5.3 million) was from anonymous sources; that is, from unidentified members.

In practice, membership organizations can simply take a portion of a member's dues and transfer the money to a small donor committee without asking for, or receiving, permission from the member.

Contributing members' dues for political purposes without their express knowledge or authorization defies the spirit of our campaign finance laws.

Worse, there are no limits on where membership organizations can go to get these funds. A national organization, for example, can siphon the dues of members in any state to spend on TV attack ads in Colorado. These organizations take member dues monthly, in small increments of under \$20, to avoid having to identify the members. But small increments add up to big money when labor unions can tap the dues of non-Colorado members.

When Amendment 27 was on the ballot in 2002, the legislature's nonpartisan research staff composed arguments in favor of the proposal, the first such argument being:

"This proposal may reduce the impact of special interests on the political process and increase the influence of individual citizens. ... By reducing the amount of money that a candidate can accept from special interests and creating small donor committees, the proposal encourages fundraising from a broad base of individual donors."

Sadly, the prediction that special-interest influence would be reduced has not materialized. And while the law meant to encourage fundraising, one can hardly call the taking of dues fundraising.

To adhere to the spirit of the law, membership organizations should solicit money from members rather than just take it.

A campaign finance rule, issued by the secretary of state's office in August 2006, addressed this issue and advanced the letter and the spirit of Amendment 27. The rule required membership organizations to obtain annual permission from members before transferring a portion of dues to a small donor committee.

The rule received a great deal of public scrutiny last year because it went into effect weeks before the November election. At the time, I too expressed my concern regarding the timing of the rule, even though I support its objective. I also had concerns about whether the secretary of state had authority to adopt such a rule.

Now, 16 months before the 2008 primaries, any concerns on timing should be satisfied. In the intervening months, any membership organization can obtain permission from its members to use a portion of their dues to fund a small donor committee. I also believe that requiring membership organizations to obtain permission advances the intent of Amendment 27. The amendment gives the secretary of state authority to adopt rules for the enforcement of the law; I therefore believe that the secretary of state acted within that authority in adopting this rule.

Yesterday, a legislative panel voted to revoke the rule, choosing to side with big-money special interests at the expense of Colorado voters. It seems, for the time being, special interest membership organizations will continue to have a disproportionate level of influence over our political process.

*Mike Coffman is Colorado secretary of state.*

[Print](#)[Email](#)[Return to Top](#)[Subscribe](#)[Subscribe](#)

### Top Opinion Items

[Chemical plants still a security concern](#)[Seek two-way dialogue on Iraq](#)[Unequal costs of warming](#)[Kerry & Heinz: West's new environmentalists](#)[Mike Coffman: Campaign rule is good policy](#)[Are Denver radio hosts accountable?](#)

### Top Stories

[Durango goes to windmills](#)[3 Fort Carson soldiers die in Iraq](#)[Chavez: Castro nearly recovered](#)[Brazen Baghdad strike](#)[Conviction would cost Nacchio more](#)[Durango goes to windmills](#)[Broncos release Al Wilson](#)[Temp home of Hornets bids farewell](#)[Imus: Rap demeans women more](#)[Smokin' premiere for 'Combover: The Movie'](#)

### Web Page

**Blocked**

You have tried to access a web page which is in violation of your internet usage policy. If you need to reach this site for Business purposes, an ISR from your Divisional Authority with the following information is required:

- Site URL
- Purpose
- Length of time access is requested

Thank-you.

URL:  
ads.adsonar.com

Invalid Domain.