



Signatures submitted to ban lobbyist gifts, cap donations

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — A group that wants to ban most lobbyist gifts to lawmakers turned in signatures Thursday to get a question on November's ballot that would let voters decide the issue.

The ballot initiative, spearheaded by an organization called Clean Missouri, also would make individual lawmakers' records subject to open records law, lower limits on campaign contributions to lawmakers and change the process for drawing state legislative districts.

“We are, frankly, tired of talking to our state reps about things that they actually don't listen to,” Cassandra Gould, a pastor and the head of the social justice organization Missouri Faith Voices, said after a press conference Thursday. “We believe that it really needed to be the voters collectively speaking.”

Clean Missouri's campaign director, Sean Nicholson, said the group had collected almost 347,000 signatures, more than twice the required amount to get a proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot. The signatures must be verified by local election authorities and the secretary of state's office before approving the measure to go before voters.

The initiative would also ban fundraising on state property and require legislators to wait two years before becoming lobbyists. Lobbyist gifts would be capped at \$5.

Currently, there are no limits to lobbyist gifts, although they must be reported, and individual lawmakers are exempt from the state's open records law.

The most controversial portion of the proposal is arguably the change in re-districting. Legislative districts are set to be redrawn after the 2020 census, and currently are created by two governor-appointed, bipartisan commissions. Those commissions would still exist under Clean Missouri's proposal, but they would instead be tasked with reviewing a map drawn by a “non-partisan state demographer,” with the aim of making future elections more competitive.

That demographer would be chosen by the state auditor, although Senate majority and minority leaders would be able to veto some candidates.

Sam Cooper, the executive director of the Missouri Republican Party, said that change would give the state auditor too much power.

“I think they’ve couched ethics reform with redistricting, with the real intent to be redistricting rather than ethics reform,” he said.

Redistricting is a major focus nationally both for Republicans and Democrats in advance of the 2020 Census, which will be used to redraw districts. During the last round of redistricting, Republicans who had increased their ranks in the 2010 election in many states subsequently drew districts that helped shore of their majorities during the ensuing decade. Democrats have now launched a more aggressive redistricting effort, and the U.S. Supreme Court is weighing several cases seeking to set a standard for when political gerrymandering crosses become unconstitutional.

Cooper also criticized the group’s donors. Earlier this year Clean Missouri received a quarter-of-a-million dollars from a St. Louis-based organization called Move Ballot Fund, just three days after that fund received \$300,000 from the lobbying arm of liberal billionaire George Soros’ philanthropic network. The fund had previously raised only \$100.

Nicholson said Clean Missouri did have bipartisan support, and highlighted Republican Sen. Rob Schaaf of St. Joseph as one example.

Lawmakers have talked for years about similar reforms. A proposal to ban lobbyist gifts and change term limits passed the Senate in April but has not yet been voted on in the House, and there are less than three weeks in the session.

Republican Gov. Eric Greitens signed an executive order more than a year ago banning lobbyist gifts to his employees, but senators criticized the governor Thursday for receiving almost \$60,000 worth of travel costs during his time in office from a company owned by one of Greitens’ biggest donors.