



CENTER FOR ETHICS IN GOVERNMENT
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To: State Government Committee, Pennsylvania Senate
From: Natalie O'Donnell Wood and Peggy Kerns, Center for Ethics in Government,
National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
Date: April 28, 2014
Re: State Gift Laws and Pennsylvania Comparison

Disclaimer: The Center for Ethics in Government at NCSL does not rank states assessing the strength or weakness of their laws. We make no judgment on whether a law is effective or should be copied. We do not develop model legislation. Our research focuses on how ethics and lobbying laws apply to the legislative branch of government. The following analysis provides legislators and staff with information on how Pennsylvania's gift law compares to other states. We are not suggesting any particular changes or revisions. Ethics laws differ from state to state. We have found that the region of the country, local customs and traditions, and scandals and controversies, often influence the passing of ethics laws.

State Gift Laws

Every state has bribery laws and bans on giving and receiving gifts in exchange for favors. The growing trend is for states to further restrict gifts, even absent a quid pro quo. In 1957, Wisconsin became the first "no cup of coffee" state when it prohibited legislators from receiving anything of value from lobbyists. More states began to restrict gifts following the Watergate scandal in 1972. The Jack Abramoff scandal at the congressional level in 2006 spurred another round of reforms at the state level.

The Ethics Center divides gift laws loosely into three categories: zero tolerance or no cup of coffee, monetary gift thresholds, and bans on gifts that influence official action.

Zero tolerance or no cup of coffee. Nine states – Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, South Carolina and Wisconsin – ban lobbyists from giving gifts to lawmakers. Exceptions exist within these stringent laws. In Wisconsin, legislators can accept anything of value if it also is available to the general public. Colorado allows gifts under \$50 from the general public. Florida has a gift exception for floral arrangements or other celebratory items given to legislators and displayed in the chambers the opening day of the session.