



M U L T I S T A T E

[How one donor network is pushing the envelope on California campaign money](#) (California)

Sift through the campaign contributions to Robert Rivas, the Salinas Democrat angling to [become the next speaker of the California Assembly](#), and a name keeps popping up: Govern For California.

The organization's statewide chapter gave the maximum \$9,800 to Rivas in 2021. So did its Marin chapter, Hollywood chapter, Golden Gate chapter, Palo Alto chapter and four others. In the past 14 months, 16 Govern For California chapters have given him a combined \$116,000 — nearly a tenth of everything he's raised this election cycle.

Over the last two years, Rivas' 2022 reelection committee has been a top recipient of campaign contributions from the [Govern For California network](#), according to a CalMatters analysis of state campaign finance records. During the same period, financial disclosure forms, lobbying reports and Govern For California emails show that his brother, Rick Rivas, has served as both a political advisor to the statewide organization and as a consultant to Robert Rivas' campaign.

But Assemblymember Rivas is hardly the only beneficiary of Govern For California spending. In the 2022 election cycle so far, the network has donated more than \$3 million to more than 110 candidates across California, the vast majority of the money going to 82 running for the state Senate and Assembly.

Govern For California characterizes its [18 chapters as "force multipliers"](#) that amplify the influence of its donors on state politics and government. The 11-year-old organization — the brainchild of 68-year-old Stanford lecturer David Crane, and funded primarily by a group of Bay Area venture capitalists, tech executives and philanthropists — opposes what it regards as excessive sway of labor unions over state policy.

None of the campaign finance experts CalMatters spoke with said they thought Govern For California was doing anything illegal. But Ann Ravel, former head of the Federal Election

Commission and California's campaign finance agency, said its chapter donation operation was "undemocratic," albeit similar to the model organized labor unions use.

Some experts also questioned whether it's a way for its small cadre of wealthy donors to evade contribution caps designed to limit anyone from having outsized influence on state politics.

"Aside from getting around contribution limits, there doesn't seem to be much reason to go through this extra effort," said Stan Oklobdzija, a visiting public policy professor at UC Riverside who researches campaign finance. He said he hadn't seen anything comparable to the Govern For California strategy in the state.

CalMatters reviewed the Govern For California website and other public explanations of its network, analyzed campaign finance records maintained by the Secretary of State's office, and spoke to people familiar with the organization to understand how it operates.

In April 2020, state campaign finance regulators [issued a letter](#) giving Govern For California a green light to establish its network of chapters, each subject to its own campaign contribution limit.

That permission was on condition that "the GFC Statewide Committee and all local chapters are controlled by different individuals, who independently direct and control the entities' respective contributions," [wrote](#) Dave Bainbridge, general counsel for the Fair Political Practices Commission, which regulates, monitors and enforces state campaign finance laws.

That independence is a murky concept under California campaign finance law.

Crane and Rick Rivas regularly consult with the chairpersons of all 18 chapters; public records and social media accounts show that some are friends and former students of Crane's. A majority of the funding for the chapters is funneled through a central network committee. Many of those chapters then regularly make identically sized donations to the same candidates on the same days, using the same treasurer and law firm — to 13 candidates in the final two weeks before the June 7 primary. So far in this campaign, 29 candidates have received contributions from at least half of the chapters.

And while Govern For California chapters received contributions from nearly 250 donors this election, state campaign finance records show that nearly two-thirds of all the money raised came from just 20 people — donors who can, and often do, make separate maximum allowable contributions to the same candidates the chapters are supporting.

Through its chapter arrangement, the Govern For California network has been able to expand its fundraising potential 18-fold. Individual donors can give the maximum amount to each chapter, either by making separate contributions or, like 86% of donations as of late July, routing them through a central “Govern For California Network Committee.” There is even a handy button on the Govern For California website that lets a donor max out to each chapter automatically.

The line between organizations working together toward the same goal and those that are simply different branches of the same big-spending entity can be blurry. A spokesperson for the FPPC declined to comment on whether its enforcement division had ever investigated Govern For California.

State election regulators will typically consider a series of questions when making that fine distinction, said Tracey Wigglesworth, a campaign finance and election attorney who spent five and a half years in the FPPC’s enforcement division: Do the different committees have the same officers in charge? Is one committee paying for another’s legal and administrative costs? Do they get their funding from the same source? And are their contributions “made in concert or otherwise coordinated?”

If the answers to these questions are “yes,” the committees might be considered part of the same entity and find themselves capped under a common, combined contribution limit. But, she said, “this analysis depends on the facts of the case.”

In a response to CalMatters, Crane declined to answer more than a dozen specific questions about Govern For California’s structure and political aims, including its backing of Rivas, who has sought to oust and replace Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, a Lakewood Democrat.

Instead, Crane replied via email that CalMatters “apparently developed a thesis for a hit piece before contacting us. I don’t know which special interest put you up to it, but it’s not what I ever expected of your organization.”

(Crane and many donors to Govern For California [are financial supporters of CalMatters](#), which retains full authority over editorial content and [makes news judgments independent of donor support](#).)

Crane has strenuously rejected the notion that Govern For California is doing anything unique or remarkable with its campaign finance structure. In recent emails to CalMatters and to Govern For California supporters, he likened the network’s spending to the way that organized labor groups, which have statewide chapters and local affiliates, transfer money to one another and regularly support the same candidates while remaining legally independent of one another.

“As much as we would enjoy pride of authorship, there’s nothing new about our model,” Crane told CalMatters.

“For too long, only special interests organized political activity in Sacramento,” he wrote in a separate message to the Govern For California mailing list. “The only thing that’s new is that, in 2011, someone started organizing for the general interest.”

That goal — to “create a counter-force to the special interests” — is shared among the chapters, which “all have the same objective,” [according to Govern For California’s website](#). While the group funds Democrats and Republicans, business-friendly moderates and progressives, it generally supports charter schools and raises alarms about the state’s pension liabilities to its unionized employees.

In addition to campaign donations, Govern for California spent roughly \$259,000 lobbying state lawmakers in the first six months of this year, records show. Among its top priorities: supporting legislation to [lengthen the amount of time](#) that teachers would be required to work before getting tenure and [to require the state to make school spending data easier to sift through](#). The group has also opposed measures to ban [“foreign-influenced” corporations](#) from making political contributions and a bill that would [allow legislative staffers to unionize](#).

CalMatters spoke to eight campaign finance experts about Govern For California. Five said its chapter donation model represents something new in California electoral politics, and some found it concerning.

It “seems to be contrary to the spirit of the idea of having contribution limitations,” said Ravel, the former elections watchdog, who also received \$25,700 from the Govern For California network when she ran for state Senate in 2020. But, she added, “unfortunately that’s the campaign finance system we’ve been handed by the U.S. Supreme Court.”

But Bob Stern, the former president of the Los Angeles-based Center for Governmental Studies and the FPPC’s first general counsel, said he’s “much less concerned” about Govern For California than big-spending committees backed by a single industry or corporation.

He added that there’s a difference between making recommendations to the chairpersons of a committee, and exerting direct control over its political activity.

“It’s free speech,” said Stern. “It’s me coming along recommending that they support a certain candidate. You can’t stop me from making recommendations, as long as I’m not directing them.”

CalMatters tried to contact the chairpersons for all 18 chapters to understand how they operate and their relationship to Crane and Rick Rivas. The majority did not respond and none agreed to be quoted.

Crane, Rick Rivas and Robert Rivas all declined to answer questions about whether they were using the Govern For California network to advance Robert Rivas' leadership ambitions in the Legislature. A spokesperson for Assembly Speaker Rendon also declined to comment.

A new campaign finance model?

After CalMatters began making inquiries to chapter chairpersons and donors about the Govern For California network, Crane sent an explanation to the mailing list.

“We got the idea from SEIU,” he wrote, referring to the influential Service Employees International Union, which represents 700,000 public- and private-sector workers across 17 local chapters in California.

This election, committees affiliated with SEIU have spent at least \$2.9 million in California legislative races, often donating to the same candidates.

Crane's email highlighted specific contributions this year to an unnamed Assembly candidate from 16 union-sponsored committee

s, including four SEIU locals, and suggested that these committees — representing teachers, California State University faculty, nurses, steelworkers and other employees — were managing their spending in a manner comparable to the Govern For California network. Campaign finance records suggest that the candidate is Elizabeth Alcantar, a Democrat from southeast Los Angeles who failed to make it into the top two for November alongside the Govern For California network-supported Democrat Blanca Pacheco.

The comparison to unions divided the campaign finance experts whom CalMatters interviewed.

Although Ravel, the former FPPC chairperson, said she does not view Govern For California's chapters as “different than the way the system already operates,” other experts cited potentially critical distinctions.

Union locals have hundreds, if not thousands, of members who elect leaders to represent them in collective bargaining and direct political spending decisions. It is not clear how Govern For California chapter chairpersons are selected, whether the chapters have distinct memberships,

or if these committees serve other functions aside from distributing money, a decision ultimately at the hands of the one to four people who lead each chapter.

Unions also tend to draw upon a broader donor base through membership dues, mainly in increments of less than \$100, far below individual contribution limits — as opposed to Govern For California’s chapters, which have pulled in 62% of all contributions from just 20 people this election.

“This is totally different than anything I’ve seen before, and it’s very creative. It’s a very creative way to maximize electoral strength,” said Amber Maltbie, an election and campaign finance lawyer with the Los Angeles-based law firm Nossaman LLP.

Oscar Lopez, political director for SEIU California, said its endorsement process involves members from each local affiliate meeting with candidates, asking questions and making recommendations to the state council in a “bottom-up process” that “puts workers in the center of decision-making.” Then, he said, locals can decide whether to contribute to those candidates endorsed by the council.

“Govern For California is like a network of offshore accounts more than anything else. It’s meant to hide from accountability, create confusion in place of transparency, and is directed from the top,” Lopez said in a statement.

Some campaign finance experts made another comparison to Govern For California: Political parties, which have local county committees and clubs that are nominally independent but share money and generally make contributions in accordance with the recommendations of the statewide party.

Unlike Govern For California, however, their leaders are also elected; their spending is subject to [different, sometimes stricter, transparency rules](#); and parties exist to promote a host of electoral and policy causes at the behest of thousands of constituents.

It is not clear, despite their names, that each Govern For California chapter represents a distinct constituency. The statewide, Golden Gate, San Francisco, Common Sense, Bay Area and Marin chapters all have chairpersons who live in San Francisco, according to [a list on the Govern For California website](#). Los Angeles used to have its own local committee, but it was renamed the Sierra Chapter in 2021. Its co-chairpersons are a married couple from Piedmont, a wealthy enclave surrounded by Oakland, voter registration records show.

Though Crane, who serves as co-chairperson of the statewide chapter, declined to be interviewed for this story, he initially agreed to field questions by email.

CalMatters sent him a list of detailed questions, including about how the chapters are formed, why they were organized in this way, how the chapters are governed and whether they have their own individual memberships, who has power to appoint or dismiss its chairpersons, what explained the pattern of same-day contributions by multiple chapters and whether the network was constructed with the goal of enabling repeat donors to support candidates above and beyond what they would be allowed through individual contributions.

Crane did not answer any of those questions.

“GFC is proud of our diverse team of staff, consultants, and over 1,000 members from our network from whom we take advice,” Crane wrote in his email. “GFC is also grateful for the 37 chapter chairs who have stepped up to take independent action to advance the general interest and fight special interests.”

“This will be my last communication with you,” he added.

Countering organized labor

A former economic adviser to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Crane launched Govern For California to counter what he and his supporters see as the corrosive influence on state politics of campaign contributions from organized labor and other special interests. Crane has long been an [outspoken advocate](#) of reducing the state’s multi-billion dollar unfunded liability for public employee retirement, partly by reducing pension and retiree health benefits for state workers.

“They are to me a voice of sanity in understanding the finances of California,” such as unfunded pension liabilities, said Leonard Baker, a partner at the Palo Alto private equity firm Sutter Hill Ventures. He is one of seven financial supporters of Govern For California who made maximum contributions to all of the network’s 18 chapters in both 2021 and 2022 — a total outlay of \$291,600.

He said he supports the organization’s advocacy against “the fiscal path that California is on and the degree to which unions, particularly public employee unions, are maximizing their specific short-term interests.”

“I have no issue with special interests trying to maximize their special interests,” Baker, a donor to CalMatters, said in a phone interview. “I have an issue with an imbalance.”

Govern For California first launched into California electoral politics in 2012, when it spent nearly \$200,000 to influence a San Fernando Valley Assembly race, supporting Democrat Brian Johnson, a charter school executive director, against another Democrat, Adrin Nazarian. Nazarian won and is retiring from the Assembly this year.

Govern for California [previously made independent expenditures](#), which are not covered by donation and spending limits but cannot be coordinated with a candidate's campaign. It also bundled contributions from major donors. But in recent years, it established its current network of chapters that contribute directly to candidates.

California campaign finance regulators gave that approach their conditional seal of approval in the ["advice letter"](#) from April 2020.

The commission issues advice letters at the request of a political committee or its sponsor. Its conclusions are "based upon the facts given to the FPPC, not as determined by any investigation," Jay Wierenga, a spokesperson for the commission, explained in an email.

Individual donors are limited in how much they can give to a single candidate in California. These caps vary by the office being sought and the committee receiving the donation. Currently a donor can give a legislative candidate as much as \$9,800 per election — \$4,900 during the primary and another \$4,900 during the general. They can donate \$8,100 per calendar year to a general purpose committee, such as a Govern For California chapter.

Because the 18 Govern For California chapters are considered legally independent, a single donor could give as much as \$145,800 per year across the entire network.

Independence, as defined by [California campaign finance law](#), does not prevent the chapters from working together closely.

Govern For California chapter chairpersons receive spending recommendations from Crane and Rick Rivas, including in monthly briefings, according to multiple sources involved in the network's operations. The chapters use the same treasurer, Steven Lucas, a partner at Nielsen Merksamer, one of the state's most prominent political law firms. Lucas did not respond to an interview request.

The chapters also regularly fund the same campaigns.

Rep. Perez fined for campaign finance violations (Rhode Island)

State Rep. Ramon A. Perez, D-Providence, was fined for campaign finance violations after an audit found that he used campaign funds for personal use and failed to accurately report other transactions.

The R.I. Board of Elections voted on Wednesday to fine Perez \$6,000 and ordered him to reimburse his campaign bank account for the \$1,072 he used for personal expenses.

Perez has agreed to pay the fine, with the first \$3,000 due at the end of June 2023 and the second half due at the end of June 2024. He will also reimburse his campaign account.

Between January 2020 and March 2022, Perez reported \$6,574 in loan proceeds and \$8,595 in expenses which were not supported by campaign bank account statements, according to the [audit](#) by the Board of Elections. The audit also shows \$5,653 in loan proceedings and contributions and 89 transactions totaling \$7,831 in expenditures that appeared on campaign bank statements but were not reported in campaign reports.

An additional \$5,457 of campaign expenditures disclosed on campaign finance reports could not be validated and a \$1,000 contribution from a Political Action Committee was misreported as received from a candidate.

In the audit, Perez told the board that he would often communicate contributions and expenses to his treasurer via phone, and that the treasurer did not review source documentation or campaign bank statements. He also explained he made some campaign purchases from his personal funds instead of his campaign account.

Perez acknowledged using funds from the campaign account for personal expenses, saying that “the campaign owed him money which allowed him to make the personal expenditure,” reads his response in the audit.

Judge orders Tim Eyman to give up home to pay off debt from campaign finance violations (Washington)

A federal bankruptcy judge ordered Tim Eyman on Thursday to give up his share of a house to pay toward what he owes on a campaign finance judgment and to other creditors, according to a media release from the Office of Washington State Attorney General.

The resolution requires Eyman to sell his share of a Mukilteo house to Karen Williams, formerly Karen Eyman, who will purchase the home for \$906,484 and continue to live there.

The proceeds of the sale will go toward a civil penalty of \$2.6 million that Eyman was ordered to pay in April 2021 after he was convicted of violating Washington's campaign finance law.

In addition to the civil penalty, Eyman was ordered to pay \$2.9 million to cover the state's court and investigative costs and fees.

According to the media release, Eyman has paid \$538,840.98 toward the judgment and currently owes \$5,628,456.42, including accrued interest.

According to the media release, Eyman filed for bankruptcy in Nov. 2018 before the trial "in an attempt to avoid accountability for campaign finance violations" related to a illegal kick-back scheme that the Public Disclosure Commission called "one of the most egregious" violations they had ever seen.

Posh southwestern Pa. party spotlights how lawmakers and lobbyists mingle out of the public eye (Pennsylvania)

On a chilly December evening, as the sun slipped below the hills around Canonsburg, House Republicans from southwestern Pennsylvania gathered for a lavish, private holiday party.

Surrounded by the Tuscan-inspired decor of the restaurant Bella Sera — Italian for "beautiful evening" — they snacked on pan-seared crab cakes, grilled lamb and bacon-wrapped scallops. After the hors d'oeuvres, they milled around entree stations laden with stuffed banana peppers, sesame-glazed chicken and flank steak with chimichurri.

It was the second annual gathering of the self-titled Southwest Society, and the unofficial group of GOP legislators — along with lobbyists, local leaders and a few prominent politicians from elsewhere in the state — downed thousands of dollars of food and drink.

But who picked up the hefty tab at the end of the night remains a mystery.

An invitation to the party obtained exclusively by the Post-Gazette encouraged black-tie attire, and specified the event was "Invitation only." It listed no cost of admission but offered four "sponsorship" levels. The lowest, "Friend," cost \$1,000, while the highest, "Visionary," cost ten times as much.

Sponsorship levels are common on invitations to political fundraisers, and politicians have to publicly report those contributions. But “the event was not a fundraiser,” according to Phil Saggese, the political consultant listed on the invitation. Neither he nor Rep. Natalie Mihalek, the Upper St. Clair Republican who paid the deposit for the previous year’s event, would answer any other questions about the private party, including who cut checks and for how much.

Sheltered by Pennsylvania’s notoriously weak lobbying and disclosure laws, not a single legislator reported that evening at Bella Sera. The only publicly searchable record of money changing hands for the event is a \$1,000 payment to Bella Sera from the Pittsburgh firefighters union’s political action committee, listed on the union PAC’s year-end campaign finance report. The year before, Ms. Mihalek paid Bella Sera a \$1,000 deposit from her own campaign funds.

The lack of disclosure breeds cynicism among the public and erodes faith in democracy, ethics experts say.

“There’s so little trust that there has to be an environment of complete and utter transparency,” said Khalif Ali, executive director of Common Cause PA, a nonprofit government watchdog group.

'Rock bottom'

Pennsylvania is among a minority of states that places no limits on the value of gifts special interests can give legislators. In neighboring Ohio, for instance, it’s illegal for public officials to accept expensive gifts or extravagant meals. Even members of Pennsylvania’s own executive branch can’t accept gifts or meals under an executive order signed by Gov. Tom Wolf the day he took office.

But the Legislature has blocked nearly every effort to limit the ability of special interests to shower lawmakers with dinners, drinks and travel, or to give the public a clear picture of what their representatives and senators allow lobbyists to buy them.

Until 2014, lobbyists could even hand cash to legislators, “which in another state or at the federal level would be called a bribe,” said Craig Holman, who lobbies Congress to enact stricter ethics rules on behalf of Open Citizen, a nonprofit government-reform group.

People can still give cash to state lawmakers as long as they aren’t registered lobbyists, according to House and Senate rules. The Senate bans cash gifts from anyone “seeking official action” from the chamber. House rules require that the cash come from a family member or a friend.

“Pennsylvania is not in a good place, as far as ethics. It’s really at rock bottom,” said Mr. Holman, who helped draft the federal Honest Leadership and Open Government Act after the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal in the mid-2000s.

Abramoff, a former lobbyist, spent more than three years in prison after he pleaded guilty in a sprawling corruption investigation that also put an Ohio congressman and two high-ranking members of the George W. Bush administration behind bars. As part of his influence-peddling operation, Abramoff treated top officials to meals at his posh Washington restaurant.

In addition to allowing limitless gifts, meals and drinks, Pennsylvania’s disclosure rules are so weak that the public sees only a tiny fraction of what lawmakers are given. Those rules say special interests have to report gifts to an official if they add up to more than \$250 in the course of a year, and meals if they add up to more than \$650.

But there’s a catch.

The gifts and meals often flow through lobbyists, and lobbyists represent several clients at once. Say a lobbyist buys \$1,000 in meals and drinks for a legislator over the course of a year. If that lobbyist represents five clients, he can split those costs evenly among them. So instead of \$1,000 from one source, which would have to be reported, the legislator gets \$200 from five sources, none of which has to be made public.

That loophole has allowed millions of dollars to flow from special interests to lawmakers, undisclosed, according to figures from the Pennsylvania Department of State.

“What we’re seeing with these situations — because of the campaign finance laws, donor disclosure, the wide-open structure of lobbying disclosure — there are a number of ways to circumvent the laws,” Mr. Ali said.

One of the Legislature’s own committees highlighted the problem in a 2019 report.

“The thresholds, and the ability to allocate expenses for gifts and hospitality among a lobbyist’s principals, result in a substantial skewing of the public’s perception of money actually spent on public officials and employees,” according to a 2019 report from the state House Government Oversight Committee.

Last year, special interests spent more than \$1.6 million on gifts, hospitality, transportation and lodging for state officials and their families, according to the Department of State’s annual

lobbying disclosure report. But itemized gift reports filed by those special interests identify recipients for less than \$18,000 of that. They include \$11,400 worth of charitable contributions from PECO Energy in the names of six legislators, and \$2,344 from the conservative advocacy group Opportunity Solutions Project for a legislative reception.

Aside from the firefighters union's payment to Bella Sera, not a dime of the Southwest Society event was publicly reported on legislators' 2021 statements of financial interest and lobbyist gift disclosures, based on a Post-Gazette review.

"Why we give, that's our private business," Pittsburgh Fire Fighters IAFF Local No. 1 president Ralph Sicuro said.

Ms. Mihalek did not respond to attempts to contact her as recently as the Friday before publication, including multiple calls, emails, and visits to her district office and home seeking details about the black-tie affair. On her signed Statement of Financial Interest, filed more than three months after the party, she reported no gifts or meals in 2021.

Dennis Roddy, a senior adviser at ColdSpark, a GOP consulting firm that does campaign work for Ms. Mihalek, said "every cent" lobbyists spent at the event went to the restaurant, but neither he nor Ms. Mihalek would provide specifics.

Capitol culture

Far from an anomaly, the Southwest Society event is just one example of the ways legislators and lobbyists mingle behind closed doors, dining and drinking together, ethics experts and legislators said.

"It's important to understand the relationship between the lobbyist and the government official," Mr. Holman said. "We want to get something out of a government official. The easiest way to get something out of them is to do what Jack Abramoff did, or something like this invitation. [Then] the government official feels obligated — if not endeared — to the lobbyist."

During the annual Pennsylvania Society gathering in midtown Manhattan, special interests fete crowds of elected officials in the gilded ballrooms of the Waldorf Astoria and nearby high-end hotels. John "Johnny Doc" Dougherty, a longtime Philadelphia union boss and political kingmaker, threw some of the biggest bashes, with live music and swag for political elite of both parties. Dougherty, who helped elect his brother Kevin to the state Supreme Court, resigned his union post in November after a federal bribery conviction.

On the smaller end of the scale are the lobbyist-funded informal dinners and evenings at the bar that take place routinely in Harrisburg when the Legislature is in session. Rarely, if ever, are they reported publicly.

“Out in Harrisburg, it’s fairly common,” said Rep. Tim O’Neal, R-South Strabane, who attended the Southwest Society dinner. It’s on members not to allow those get-togethers to unduly influence their votes, he said. “I’m not that cheap of a date.”

Little actual lobbying occurs at events like the Southwest Society. Rather, lawmakers mingle with lobbyists and lobbyists’ clients so when they meet in more formal settings to talk about legislation they’re familiar with one another, he said.

“Any good idea needs 102 votes” to pass the House, Mr. O’Neal said. “The lobbying aspect can help educate members. We have to vote on literally every issue there is. You can’t be an expert in all of them. ... In the normal course of a day, I don’t get a chance to build those relationships.”

Average citizens don’t get to build those relationships either — and they can’t afford the \$1,000 it costs to be a “friend” of the Southwest Society, said Rabbi Michael Pollack, executive director of MarchOnHarrisburg. The nonprofit group has advocated, protested and even crashed lawmakers’ fundraisers to try to pressure the Legislature to enact a gift ban. One such demonstration led to Rabbi Pollack’s arrest outside a legislative leader’s Capitol office.

“When you go into Harrisburg and talk about making bribery illegal, they don’t want to have that conversation,” Rabbi Pollack said.

Forcing their hand

MarchOnHarrisburg has a menu of government and ethics reforms, most aimed at limiting the influence of money in politics, but they decided to focus first on the gift ban because “it’s the lowest-hanging of the rotten fruit. You don’t need to explain it to people. Everybody gets it,” Rabbi Pollack said.

Since 2000, members of both parties have introduced more than 30 bills banning gifts, Rabbi Pollack said. Only two made it out of committee, the most recent in October 2021.

The next step would be a vote from the full House, but Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff, R-Centre, continues to block the bill.

“Leader Benninghoff has been a supporter of the concept of a gift ban, but has endeavored to ensure that any such policy is rooted in common sense,” Mr. Benninghoff’s spokesman, Jason Gottesman, wrote in response to questions from the Post-Gazette.

Mr. Gottesman declined to elaborate, but Mr. Benninghoff has said he thinks Mr. Wolf’s complete ban on gifts is too restrictive.

MarchOnHarrisburg activists have teamed up with an unnamed legislator to try to force Mr. Benninghoff’s hand next month through a parliamentary maneuver that hasn’t been used successfully since 1921, Rabbi Pollack said. The maneuver would force House members to vote on whether to add the gift ban bill onto the day’s agenda — the first time every House member would have to take a public vote on such a measure.

“It’s going to happen, unless they cancel the session,” Rabbi Pollack said. “If everybody keeps their word to us, this passes almost unanimously. ... We’re going to put them all on the record. It’s gonna be fun.”

The bill would bar lobbyists from giving more than \$250 worth of gifts to a legislator in a year, but keep the \$650 reporting threshold for meals and beverages.

And reporting requirements aren’t enough, Mr. Holman said.

“No one keeps records. No one’s adding everything up,” Mr. Holman said. Secretive dinners like the Southwest Society, where the public can’t see who’s wining and dining their lawmakers, will continue unless the law bans them outright, he said. “It’s easy to just hand over \$10,000. They’re sophisticated enough not to say, ‘Here’s a bribe.’ What they do is hand it over, shake hands and say, ‘You know what I want.’”