

Open, clean government is good for everyone in Wisconsin

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Sen. Jennifer Shilling talks about Wisconsin's historical bipartisan commitment to laws that protect citizen access, prevent political corruption and maintain high ethical standards in our government. In recent weeks, Republicans who control the State Legislature in Madison are pushing a package of bills that may bring this commitment to an end.

MADISON - Differences of opinion are inevitable in government. Disagreements between Democrats and Republicans over public investments, funding for schools or the fairness of our tax code are common.

Despite these differences, everyone can agree that an open, transparent and accessible government is essential to our democracy.

Throughout Wisconsin's history, both Democrats and Republicans have supported laws to protect citizen access, prevent political corruption and maintain high ethical standards.

Unfortunately, this historical bipartisan agreement is nearing an end.

Republicans who control the State Legislature in Madison are pushing a package of bills that severely limit the ability of Wisconsin citizens to have their voices heard and hold elected officials accountable.

These bills follow the recent attempt by Gov. Walker and legislative Republicans to gut Wisconsin's open record laws. These misguided efforts to limit disclosure of public documents were abandoned only after scores of newspapers, media outlets and citizens responded with overwhelming opposition.

Now, less than three months after the failed attempt to restrict open record access, Republicans are using an end-around tactic to rewrite long-standing campaign finance, ethics and anti-corruption laws.

The first of these bills, Senate Bill 43, was privately signed into law by Gov. Walker on October 23. This law makes it more difficult to prosecute political corruption by exempting politicians from Wisconsin's John Doe criminal investigation laws.

A second bill completely rewrites Wisconsin's campaign finance laws allowing corporations to contribute directly to political parties and eliminating important disclosure requirements. The sweeping changes in this bill go beyond the controversial Citizens United Supreme Court decision and will result in even more TV ads, robocalls and special interest attack mailers during campaign season.

Finally, a third Republican proposal dismantles the non-partisan Government Accountability Board which is tasked with overseeing state elections and ethics laws. The Board would be replaced with political appointees using a flawed model that encourages partisan bickering and gridlock rather than actual oversight.

Taken together, these bills make sweeping changes to many long-standing good government protections. This trio of bills is so troubling that one prominent government watchdog group

recently called it “a massive, coordinated blitzkrieg on democracy and transparency.”

At a time when students, families and seniors across Wisconsin continue to face serious challenges, we should be focused on strengthening our state’s economy and improving financial security.

These misguided attacks on Wisconsin’s long-standing, bipartisan tradition of open and clean government are a threat to our democratic institutions and will only serve to further polarize Wisconsin’s political environment.

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