

## STOCKS

Markets around the world see wild swings as 'Liberation Day' approaches. **C1**

## BRONCOS

Team owner Greg Penner says 'no excuses' after free agency period. **D1**

## SOAPSTONE

Northern Colorado expanse where bison roam, human history was rewritten. **E1**



# The Denver Gazette

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TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025

## COLORADO WATCH

### Judges made campaign contributions despite rules prohibiting the practice

BY DAVID MIGOYA  
The Denver Gazette

More than a half dozen judges in Colorado — each of them specially appointed and paid to oversee a divorce case since 2019 — has made at least one political campaign contribution while serving in that capacity despite a prohibition against the practice and an affirmation to uphold it, The Denver Gazette has found.

Colorado's Code of Judicial Conduct explicitly bars anyone serving as an appointed or private judge, as they are sometimes called, from mak-

ing the contributions, the same exclusion that applies to full-time sitting judges and senior judges who fill in part-time.

The private judges handle civil cases, nearly all divorces by high-end couples, away from the courthouse and the public, and their salaries and expenses are paid for by both parties.

The prohibition on campaign contributions, experts say, is to ensure the bench is free from the appearance of any outside influences and

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## Contribution



**Sunday:** Colorado has a two-tier system of justice: One for the affluent and famous to get divorced and the other for the rest of us.

**Monday:** Are the rich paying for secrecy? Private judges suppress divorce cases from the public at a rate far exceeding ones before regular district judges.

**Tuesday:** Prohibited contributions. At least seven private judges have made contributions to political organizations or campaigns despite assurances that they wouldn't.

## Lawmakers urged to reject legislation with 2040 emissions targets

BY MARISSA VENTRELLI  
The Denver Gazette

Business groups, labor unions and elected officials are urging leaders of the Colorado General Assembly not to grant a late-bill status to a proposed measure that would require companies to speed up their timelines for complying with the state's carbon emission

reduction targets and impose a cap on expenses.

According to a March 26 draft of the bill, the legislation would require utilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 95% compared to 2005 levels by 2035 and 100% by 2040. The Colorado Energy Office's Greenhouse Gas Pollution Reduction Roadmap, creat-

ed through legislation passed in 2019, requires utilities to reduce greenhouse gas pollution by 65% by 2035 and 100% by 2050, compared to 2005 levels.

The bill would also impose a 1.5% rate or cost impact cap on utilities and require the Public Utilities Commission to assess the "equity" impacts of all utilities' emissions reduction plans and

rules, including benefits to disproportionately impacted communities.

It's not immediately clear what the 1.5% cap means, such as whether it's designed to prohibit utilities from passing more than 1.5% of costs to consumers.

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## JUDGES

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to maintain the integrity of the judicial process.

It is one of the cornerstones of judicial ethics that experts say has no gray area.

But The Denver Gazette found that seven retired judges who have accepted appointments as private judges in the past six years — positions that are approved only by the state Supreme Court's chief justice — have made political contributions, despite signing oaths for each separate appointment that they would abide by the portions of the Code of Judicial Conduct that apply to them.

Several have signed the affirmations many times yet made dozens of contributions totaling thousands of dollars while serving as private judges, according to federal and state campaign contribution records reviewed by The Denver Gazette. Others gave smaller amounts, though the judicial conduct code does not distinguish between the size of the contribution nor its frequency.

Others contributed to district attorney races in jurisdictions they once presided as a full-time judge, which legal ethicists called unacceptable.

Canon 4.1(A)(4) reads: "Except as permitted by law, or by this Canon, a judge or a judicial candidate shall not: ... solicit funds for, pay an assessment to, or make a contribution to a political organization or a candidate for public office."

The Code of Judicial Conduct was changed in 2010 to reduce the number of applicable canons from nine to four, as it sits today. As part of that change, appointed judges were specifically prohibited from making political campaign contributions, just like all other judges.

Although the Supreme Court in 2011 made a mistake when it passed a rule that said appointed judges must abide by the section of the judicial code that actually applied to retired and senior judges — it fixed this in January 2025, when The Denver Gazette pointed out the error — the prohibition on campaign contributions still applied.

Oddly, the majority of petitions for the appointment of a private judge still reference Canon 9 and frequently the order by the chief justice affirming the appointment does, too.

Regardless of the error, a Judicial Department spokesperson said it's up to the judges to know what portions of the Code of Judicial Conduct apply

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Colorado's Code of Judicial Conduct prohibits all judges from making contributions to political organizations or campaigns. Here are the appointed judges who made contributions since 2019 and the total amount.

Appointed judge	#	Amount	Recipients
Angela Arkin	29	\$4,250*	Kamala Harris, Phil Weiser, Beth McCann, John Walsh
William Meyer	99	\$2,750	Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, Beth McCann, Michael Carrigan
Kevin Sidel	28	\$1,300	Kamala Harris, Becky Grossman
Elizabeth Starrs	15	\$900	DNC, John Walsh, Sean Camacho
Nancy Rice	4	\$350	Phil Weiser, John Walsh
Robert McGahey	1	\$200	DNC
Christopher Cross	1	\$35	Stop 45 PAC

\* Arkin said one \$500 contribution is a duplicate

Source: Federal Election Commission, Colorado Secretary of State

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to them.

"It is the responsibility of each judge, whether active, retired, or appointed, to follow the Code of Judicial Conduct as it applies to their work," spokesperson Suzanne Karrer told The Denver Gazette.

The Judicial Department similarly laid responsibility at judges' feet.

"Every judge has an independent responsibility to understand and comply with their ethical obligations under the Code of Judicial Conduct," the department said through a spokesperson. "Although the Department provides training and periodic reminders to judges regarding certain ethical and reporting obligations, we do not perpetually review state and federal public records to monitor whether our 400+ active and retired judges are in compliance with the Code."

## The contributions

The Denver Gazette found the seven judges made varying amounts of contributions in the time they've been an appointed judge.

Former Denver District Court Judge Bill Meyer has made nearly 100 cam-

paign contributions since January 2019, records show, totaling thousands of dollars, largely in recurring federal contributions to ActBlue, the Democratic Party political action committee.

ActBlue is a major part of the Democratic Party's fundraising infrastructure. Although it's a PAC, it works as a conduit for processing individual contributions.

Meyer has the largest number of contributions by a private judge in the six years of data reviewed by The Denver Gazette.

Meyer, in an interview, said he would report his violations to the Colorado Commission on Judicial Discipline.

"It's a violation of the Canons, I will self-report and I will stop doing it," he said, noting that his time on a case is limited, unlike his years as a full-time jurist. "I didn't know that I could not make contributions as an appointed judge. These are defined appointments."

Many of Meyer's contributions were earmarked for specific candidates, such as Kamala Harris' run for president, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Pennsylvania Congressman

Matt Cartwright.

In that time frame, Meyer accepted 32 appointments as a private judge, records show, many of those cases still pending.

Meyer retired from the Denver bench in 2000 after 16 years, three of them as the presiding judge of the domestic relations division. He joined Judicial Arbitrator Group the same year he retired.

Meyer is the managing arbitrator at JAG, which obtains the bulk of private judge appointments, records show. JAG is made up of more than two dozen retired Colorado judges, according to its web site.

Meyer bristled when asked how he could not have known the Canon restricted political contributions, especially since judges must affirm they will follow the pertinent parts of the Code of Judicial Conduct in order to receive an appointment as a private judge.

"That's an aggressive question," Meyer said firmly when asked whether he thought ignorance of the rules was an excuse. "You're being aggressive."

Meyer then walked out of the inter-

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## JUDGES

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view with The Denver Gazette.

**'I did not know ...'**

Similarly, former 18th Judicial District Court Judge Angela Arkin, who also works at JAG, made nearly three dozen campaign contributions since January 2019, records show, totaling nearly \$5,000, most of them in federal elections.

In that time, Arkin also accepted 41 private judge appointments, roughly a quarter of all the appointments made since 2019 and the most among her colleagues.

Her contributions included supporting Joe Biden and Kamala Harris' presidential campaigns, as well as significant amounts to campaigns for Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser and Denver district attorneys Beth McCann and John Walsh, records show.

Many of the \$3,000 Arkin made in federal contributions were funneled through ActBlue. She disputed a pair of \$500 contributions to Biden, claiming to The Denver Gazette that one was a duplicate. Federal records show them to be to different campaign committees and given on different dates.

Arkin retired from the district court bench in 2015 after 13 years and joined Judicial Arbitrator Group in 2017. She is considered by many to be an expert on family law matters and has been a frequent speaker on its topics. Additionally, she currently sits on the Colorado Supreme Court's advisory committee that assists with the administrative oversight of the state's entire attorney regulation system.

Like Meyer, Arkin said she didn't know she was violating the Judicial Code of Conduct.

"I did not know that the small donations I have made were a violation of Canon 4. My error," she wrote in an email to The Denver Gazette. "I have self-reported the violations you described to the Commission on Judicial Discipline. I will not be making any further political donations while I have divorce and APR cases as a private judge."

APR is the acronym used for cases involving the allocation of parental responsibilities.

Arkin added: "None of my private judge cases currently involve or ever involved politicians or had any issues that were related to politics."

The discipline commission said appointed judges are a unique situation since the Code of Judicial Conduct only

*"We really have no interest to discuss or be interviewed or to answer any of your questions... 'I see no need for that and I would advise them not to speak with you.'"*

**Attorney Samuel Gordon, the administrator at JAMS Denver office**

applies while they are a judge. So, theoretically, a judge whose appointment ends on a Thursday could make contributions on Friday and then be appointed to a new case on Monday and have to refrain again.

"We've never had the situation come up regarding appointed judges (regarding how the code would apply to an appointed judge who was between appointments)," discipline commission executive director Anne Mangiardi told The Denver Gazette. "There are rules around the judges that deal with their conduct on the bench, but off the bench, such as their conduct in politics and positions in politics, that's an interesting question that we'd spend some time discussing. We would need to see it in context before taking any position on it."

But that hasn't happen, according to records reviewed by The Denver Gazette.

Records show that Kevin Sidel has made nearly three dozen campaign contributions totaling \$1,300 since he was first appointed as a private judge in April 2020, all of them federal contributions that included Harris' presidential run.

From 1995 to 2007, Sidel was a county court and district court judge and currently is the municipal judge in Parker. He has accepted five private judge appointments since 2020.

He did not respond to a request for comment emailed to his Parker office.

Former Colorado Supreme Court Chief Justice Nancy Rice contributed \$100 to Weiser's attorney general campaign in May 2022, state records show.

Rice, who stepped down as Colorado's top judge in 2018, joined JAG that same year and accepted a pair of private judge appointments in May and September 2021, respectively. While one case had resolved in January 2022, the other didn't until January 2023.

Rice did not respond to a Denver Gazette email seeking comment.

Retired Denver District Court Judge Elizabeth Starrs, also a JAG employee, accepted the first of two private judge appointments in December 2021. The second was in August 2024.

Records show she made a dozen federal campaign contributions totaling \$600 including to the Democratic National Committee and at least three Colorado contributions totaling \$300 that included Walsh's campaign for

district attorney and Rep. Sean Camacho's bid for the statehouse.

For her occupation in her Walsh contribution, Starrs listed "private judge," records show.

Starrs was on the Denver District Court bench for 8 years, retiring in 2020, joining JAG that same year.

She did not respond to a Denver Gazette email seeking comment.

**'Free from political influence'**

Former Denver District Judge Robert McGehey Jr. was appointed as a private judge on Dec. 8, 2023, records show.

Less than three weeks later he made a \$103 federal contribution to the Democratic National Committee, and a \$100 contribution to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, records show.

McGehey retired from the bench in 2020 after 20 years where he served a stint as the presiding judge of Denver's domestic relations division. He later joined Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services (JAMS) in Denver.

Efforts to reach McGehey were unsuccessful.

Attorney Samuel Gordon, the administrator at JAMS Denver office, refused to offer any contact information that would allow The Denver Gazette the opportunity to reach McGehey.

"We really have no interest to discuss or be interviewed or to answer any of your questions," Gordon told The Denver Gazette. "I see no need for that and I would advise them not to speak with you."

Efforts to reach JAMS employee Christopher Cross, who is also a private judge, were similarly unsuccessful. Gordon refused any information that would allow The Denver Gazette to reach him.

Cross in January 2021 made a small \$35 contribution to ActBlue that was earmarked for Stop 45 PAC, which supports Democratic federal candidates.

Cross has accepted 16 appointments as a private judge since February 2020, record show. He had spent 18 years on the bench in the 18th Judicial District before retiring and joining JAMS.

The reason for preventing a judge from political activities goes back to the early 1900s, according to David Sachar, director of the Center for Judicial Ethics at the National Center for State Courts in Little Rock, Ark.

"What always comes up in judicial codes is any abuse or use of the prestige of the office," Sachar said. "If you put on the robe, it's not for you to use for private interest or benefit."

Generally, it was seen that political endorsement from judges was special, and that it appeared the jurist was trading on their name. The fine line between financially endorsing a specific candidate rather than a cause has been a matter of debate.

"There is a difference between a PAC and a person, but not much," Sachar said. "Most codes will prohibit contributions to a partisan political organization or politic of any sort."

The key, however, is to refrain from any conduct that would sullay the public confidence in the judiciary.

"Its function is to be an independent arbiter for our disputes and what instills that? Confidence," he said. "An independent judiciary that gives us confidence is the goal."

When Colorado's Code of Judicial Conduct was written, the Supreme Court offered critical guidance.

"A judge plays a different role from that of a legislator or executive branch official. Rather than making decisions based upon the expressed views or preferences of the electorate, a judge makes decisions based upon the law and the facts of every case," according to the comment section of the judicial code that prohibits political contributions when it was rewritten in 2010. "Therefore, in furtherance of this interest, judges and judicial candidates must, to the greatest extent possible, be free and appear to be free from political influence and political pressure."

It added: "Public confidence in the independence and impartiality of the judiciary is eroded if judges or judicial candidates are perceived to be subject to political influence."

Violations of the Judicial Code of Conduct are handled by the Colorado Commission on Judicial Discipline, but only if a complaint is filed.

"Judges, when they become a judge, they take on all these pretty robust rules," Mangiardi said.

David is an award-winning Senior Investigative Reporter at The Gazette and has worked in Colorado for more than two decades. He has been a journalist since 1982 and has also worked in New York, St. Louis, and Detroit.