



## What Lobbyists Really Do — And How to Empower Government to Operate in the Public Interest

Tim M. LaPira, James Madison University

Pundits who worry that U.S. government policy is controlled by special interests often point to the so-called “revolving door” – whereby officials leave posts on Capitol Hill to take jobs in the lobbying firms and think tanks that line nearby K Street in Washington DC. From those high-paying posts, they in turn supposedly push for policies in the halls of government they have just left. Such condemnations about Washington's influence industry are commonplace on both the left and the right. President Donald Trump has claimed he wants to “drain the swamp,” while President Barack Obama “banned” lobbyists from working in his administration. Over the years, Congress has imposed strict post-employment restrictions to limit when and for whom former lawmakers can lobby. But none of these rules seem to work. The revolving door is spinning faster than it ever has – and corporate America eagerly awaits on the other side, ready and able to pay top dollar to former federal officials connected to those in power who are responsible for regulating corporations, or not.

Despite rising criticism of the revolving door, social scientists know surprisingly little about actual revolving door practices. How many ex-official lobbyists are there? Do former government officials actually have more influence in Washington than others? Does the revolving door phenomenon necessarily mean the system is corrupt, or does it simply represent a logical career path for public policy professionals? In *Revolving Door Lobbying: Public Service, Private Influence, and the Unequal Representation of Interests*, we answer these questions by investigating the career histories of over 1,600 lobbyists and drawing insights from interviews with dozens of lobbyist headhunters, policymakers, and political reformers in Washington DC. Our book sheds new light on how common it is for people to move from government to private sector lobbying and provides new data on who does this and why such movements matter for interest representation. We also explain why corporate and business interests are the ones that predominantly benefit – and spell out exactly what they get from their revolving door employees.

### Questioning Conventional Wisdom about Washington Insiders

Simply following the money by asking “who benefits?” makes it appear that the wealthy and well-organized buy access and influence as an investment in shaping policy outcomes. Conventional wisdom portrays the U.S. government as the local grocer for the *Fortune* 500. But we think something else is going on.

Our work challenges the conventional wisdom that the revolving door is simply a form of institutional political corruption. Aside from a handful of well-publicized cases of obviously suspicious behavior – such as Jack Abramoff giving congressional staffers jobs in exchange for favors; or Michael Cohen, Trump's notorious lawyer and fixer, selling access to the president for large sums of money – nearly all lobbyists operate on more straightforward, above board ways. Most lobbyists do not raise large amounts of money for candidates, and few of them rely solely on “who they know” to ask special favors from elected officials. Decades ago when there were only a few former members of Congress who had turned into lobbyists, special “connections” to those in power were rare – and quite valuable. But, today so many lobbyists have such connections, that they cannot be a good measure of influence on public policy. If everybody is connected, then nobody has a special advantage just because they know some officials.

Most lobbyists, we argue, work to reduce the political uncertainty and policy risks facing their clients by providing knowledge about how government works. Or, more likely, they help their clients understand how government often does *not* work.

Our research reveals that the revolving door problem is the consequence of shifts in two major political forces: the rise of partisan polarization and the decline of government's capacity to solve problems. Revolving door lobbyists offer a form of “political insurance” coverage for the increasingly dysfunctional and

unpredictable government that has emerged in the post-Watergate era of American politics. High demand for former government officials to become lobbyists is created by the fact that the government is increasingly chaotic – not because special interests are seeking some new kind of undue influence. People with former government experience are valuable in lobbying firms more because of their knowledge of the process – what they know – than because of their personal contacts – who they know. Because firms employ former officials to get their knowledge of the process, they can justifiably defend themselves from accusations of committing outright quid pro quo corruption (where benefits are directly exchanged between government and the private sector).

## Real Dysfunctions – and What Should be Done

This is not to say the system isn't broken, however. Even if outright corruption rarely happens, we show that the revolving door distorts political representation and policy responsiveness in the United States. Corporate interests spend increasing amounts of money on teams of in-house lobbyists in their own Washington-based offices. They pay to contract with expensive specialized lobbyists in the largest K Street firms and pay dues to an increasingly large and complex ecosystem of trade and professional associations that claim to speak for them to government. Far surpassing what they pay to finance election campaigns, corporate interests pay top dollar to revolving door lobbyists in order to better understand the workings – and non-workings – of the U.S. House, Senate, and other parts of government. Because Congress does not pay its own staffers enough to stay long-term, the lobbying enterprises of U.S. corporations are increasingly vast and complex. Corporations add former staffers – and others – to their lobbyist rosters to buy a kind of premium political insurance. These employees give corporate leaders top-of-the-line expertise and a steady stream of political intelligence, helping corporations stay one step ahead of unexpected regulatory disasters, with clean hands in the process.

A real fix for America's lobbying system is not likely to happen by banning former officials from taking corporate salaries, or banning lobbyists from public service. Instead, the focus should be on fixing Congressional capacities to govern well on behalf of all groups in American society. The sooner Congress overcomes partisan divisions enough to invest in its own internal expertise and build its own autonomous capacity to respond to the public's needs, the less special interests will need to rely on revolving door lobbyists to make sense of the chaos in Washington.

**This brief was co-authored by Herschel F. Thomas.**

**Read more in Timothy M. LaPira and Herschel F. Thomas, *Revolving Door Lobbying: Public Service, Private Influence, and the Unequal Representation of Interests* (University Press of Kansas, 2017).**