



CONGRESS DEBATES LOBBYING REFORM

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Since a Republican lobbyist pleaded guilty to bribery charges earlier this year, leaders from both parties in the U.S. Congress have been emphasizing the need for “lobbying reform.”

Lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion and conspiracy, is the key witness in an investigation into allegations that members of Congress accepted money and other gifts from Abramoff and his associates in exchange for votes.

Abramoff, a close friend of powerful Republican Representative Tom Delay of Texas, has become the public face of what some politicians refer to as the “culture of corruption” in Washington.

The investigation threatens to ensnare several U.S. lawmakers and their aides, rattle the Republican and, possibly, Democratic parties, and change the way lobbyists and lawmakers do business in Washington.

Democratic challengers to the Republican-led Congress -- every seat in the House is up for election in November -- say the unethical behavior in Washington is a “Republican problem” and that a change is necessary.

Republicans counter that politicians from both parties are guilty of lobbying abuses and the problem is the system, not the party.

What is lobbying?

Lobbying, or seeking to influence the passage or defeat of legislation, is not only legal, it is protected by the Constitution under the first amendment which guarantees the right "to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Writing a letter to a representative, signing a petition and speaking at a town hall forum are examples of lobbying in its most basic form.

By lobbying, constituents tell lawmakers how proposed legislation or regulations will affect their community or business.

Lobbyists are often former congressmen or legislative staffers, hired either by an organization to forward its interests or as a consultant for multiple clients.

“There are lobbyists that represent almost every person in this country, whether it's the lobbyist for the AARP, or the lobbyists for the Children's Hospital Association, or the lobbyist for the soy bean growers,” said Representative Deborah Pryce, a Republican from Ohio.

“They have organizations and they come in and they don't always serve an ill purpose.”

Reforms in the Senate

Lobbying reform legislation will come before the Senate this week after two committees voted in favor of bills which would limit the power and reach of lobbyists.

The Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee approved a bill that would require lobbyists to provide detailed reports on their activities four times a year and make them available on the Internet. They previously only had to provide reports twice a year.

The legislation also requires lobbyists to disclose their campaign contributions and details of any trips they arrange for politicians.

There also was a proposal to create an independent office to oversee congressional ethics issues, but it was voted down.

The Senate Rules Committee drafted legislation to curtail the widespread use of “earmarks” -- a practice lawmakers use to insert pet projects such as roads or special programs into larger bills.

The bill also prohibits lawmakers from accepting gifts from lobbyists and requires that former congressmen wait two years before registering as lobbyists.

Even though Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, an Illinois Republican, said in January that Congress “need[s] to reform the rules,” the House of Representatives has been slow to enact lobbying reforms.

So far, the only lobbying reform approved by the House was to ban former members from using the House gym and from walking on the floor of the House chamber.

-- Compiled by Brian Wolly and Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra

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