What Does a Lobbyist Do?

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The role of lobbyists is controversial in American politics. Lobbyists are hired and paid by special-interest groups, companies, nonprofits, groups of citizens, and even school districts to exert influence over elected officials at all levels of government. They work at the federal level by meeting with members of Congress to introduce legislation and encourage them to vote certain ways that benefit their clients. But lobbyists work at the local and state levels as well.

**The Debate Over Their Influence**

So what makes lobbyists so unpopular among the public? Lobbyists' work comes down to money. Most Americans don't have the funds to spend on trying to influence their members of Congress, so they view special interests and their lobbyists as having an unfair advantage in creating policy that benefits them rather than the common good.

Lobbyists, however, say they simply want to make sure your elected officials "hear and understand both sides of an issue before making a decision," as one lobbying firm puts it.

There are about 9,500 lobbyists registered at the federal level, which means about 18 lobbyists for [every member of the House of Representatives](https://www.thoughtco.com/members-in-the-house-of-representatives-3368242) and [U.S. Senate](https://www.thoughtco.com/about-the-us-senate-3322271). Together they spend more than $3 billion trying to influence members of Congress every year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics in Washington, D.C.

**Who Can Be a Lobbyist?**

At the federal level, the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 defines who is and who isn’t a lobbyist. States have their own regulations on lobbyists regarding who is allowed to seek to influence the legislative process in their legislatures.

At the federal level, a lobbyist is defined by the law as someone who earns at least $3,000 over three months from lobbying activities, has more than one contact he is seeking to influence, and spends more than 20 percent of his time lobbying for a single client over a three-month period.

A lobbyist meets all three of those criteria. Critics say the federal regulations aren't strict enough and point out that many well-known former lawmakers perform the functions of lobbyists but don't actually follow the regulations.

**How Can You Spot a Lobbyist?**

At the federal level, lobbyists and lobbying firms are required to register with the Secretary of the [U.S. Senate](https://www.thoughtco.com/us-senate-basics-3368329) and the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives within 45 days of making official contact with the [president](https://www.thoughtco.com/about-president-of-the-united-states-3322139) of the United States, [vice president](https://www.thoughtco.com/vice-president-duties-and-details-3322133), member of Congress, or certain federal officials.

The list of registered lobbyists is a matter of public record.

Lobbyists are required to disclose their activities of trying to persuade officials or influence policy decision at the federal level. They are required to disclose the issues and legislation they attempted to influence, among other details of their activities.

**Biggest Lobbying Groups**

Trade associations and special interests often hire their own lobbyists. Some of the most influential lobbying groups in American politics are those that represent the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Realtors, the AARP, and the [National Rifle Association](https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-wayne-lapierre-721387).

**Loopholes in Lobbying Law**

The Lobbying Disclosure Act has been criticized for containing what some feel is a loophole that allows some lobbyists to avoid having to register with the [federal government](https://www.thoughtco.com/federal-government-structure-4140369). Specifically, for example, a lobbyist who does not work on behalf of a single client for more than 20 percent of her time does not need to register or file disclosures. She would not be considered a lobbyist under the law. The American Bar Association has proposed eliminating the so-called 20 percent rule.

**The Portrayal of Lobbyists in the Media**

Lobbyists have long been painted in a negative light because of their influence over policymakers. In 1869, a newspaper described a Capitol lobbyist this way: “Winding in and out through the long, devious basement passage, crawling through the corridors, trailing its slimy length from gallery to committee room, at last it lies stretched at full length on the floor of Congress—this dazzling reptile, this huge, scaly serpent of the lobby."

The late U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia described the problem with lobbyists and the practice itself:

"Special interest groups often wield an influence that is greatly out of proportion to their representation in the general population. This type of lobbying, in other words, is not exactly an equal opportunity activity. One-person, one-vote does not apply when the great body of citizens is under-represented in the halls of Congress compared to the well-financed, highly organized special interest groups, notwithstanding the often plausible objectives of such groups."

**Lobbying Controversies**

During the [2012 presidential race](https://www.thoughtco.com/best-2012-election-humor-2733816), Republican hopeful and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich was accused of lobbying but not registering his activities with the government. Gingrich claimed he did not fall under the legal definition of a lobbyist, even though he did seek to use his considerable influence to sway policymakers.

Former lobbyist Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty in 2006 to charges of mail fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy in a broad scandal that implicated nearly two dozen people, including former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

President Barack Obama came under fire for taking what appeared to be contradictory approaches to lobbyists. When Obama took office after winning the 2008 election, he imposed an informal ban on hiring recent lobbyists in his administration. "A lot of folks see the amounts of money that are being spent and the special interests that dominate and the lobbyists that always have access, and they say to themselves, maybe I don’t count," Obama said later.

Still, lobbyists were frequent visitors to the Obama White House. And many former lobbyists were given jobs in the Obama administration, including [Attorney General Eric Holder](https://www.thoughtco.com/president-obamas-executive-team-4123097) and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack.

**Do Lobbyists Do Any Good?**

[Former President John F. Kennedy](https://www.thoughtco.com/john-kennedy-35th-president-united-states-104759) described the work of lobbyists in a positive light, saying they are "expert technicians capable of examining complex and difficult subjects in clear, understandable fashion."

“Because our congressional representation is based upon geographical boundaries, the lobbyists who speak for the various economic, commercial and other functional interests of the country serve a useful purpose and have assumed an important role in the legislative process," Kennedy said.
Kennedy's ringing endorsement is just one voice in the ongoing debate about the perhaps undue influence wrought by monied interests. It's a contentious debate, contentious as democracy itself: since lobbyists play such a central role in the forging of policy and expression of varied groups' interests.