

Lobbying Is Democracy in Action

We're a collection of special interests. If people can't organize to influence the government, then democracy is dead.

by [Robert J. Samuelson](#) | December 12, 2008 7:00 PM EST

We here in Washington are anticipating a stampede of lobbyists, influence peddlers, media consultants, paid "experts" and self-styled crusaders. Who brought us this onslaught of special pleaders? Why it's Barack Obama, the man who vowed to "change" how Washington works and banish from the political arena all those "special interests" that were depicted as a form of lowlife. Well, this is one Obama promise doomed to fail.

The only way to eliminate lobbying and special interests is to eliminate government. The more powerful government becomes, the more lobbying there will be. So, paradoxically, Obama's ambitions for more expansive government will promote special pleading. You need only watch the response to the expected "economic stimulus" plan—totaling perhaps \$700 billion—to verify this eternal truth. A LOBBYING FRENZY FOR FEDERAL FUNDS headlined a Washington Post story. The auto-industry bailout has inspired a similar swarming.

There's more to come. Obama envisions refashioning about a third of the economy: the health-care sector, representing about 16 percent of gross domestic product (GDP); the energy sector, nearly 10 percent of GDP; and the financial sector (banks, securities brokers, insurance companies), about 8 percent of GDP. There will be a vast mobilization of interests, from radiologists to renewable-energy producers; from mutual funds to hospitals. "The conventional wisdom," says Bara Vaida, the respected lobbying reporter for the National Journal, "is that this will be a bonanza for K Street—the symbolic hub of Washington lobbyists.

Lobbyists have a bad rap, which is why politicians routinely vilify them. Denouncing them is an uncontested rhetorical lay-up. People want to blame their discontents on a conspiracy of sleazy influence merchants. Periodic scandals confirm the stereotypes: the Jack Abramoffs who wine and dine legislators, or the congressmen like Duke Cunningham who took bribes from government contractors and steered federal funds to them. But mainly the anti-lobbying bias is popular mythology.

Myth No. 1 is that lobbying is antidemocratic because it frustrates "the will of the people." Just the opposite is true: lobbying is an expression of democracy.

We are a collection of special interests, and one person's special interest is another's job or moral crusade. If people can't organize to influence government—to muzzle or shape its powers—then democracy is dead. The "will of the people" is rarely observable, because people disagree and have inconsistent desires. Of course, the "public good" should always triumph, but what represents the public good is usually debatable. The idea that the making of these choices should occur in a vacuum—delegated to an all-knowing political elite—is profoundly undemocratic. Lobbyists sharpen debate by providing an outlet for more constituencies and giving government more information.

A second myth is that lobbying favors the wealthy, including corporations, because only they can afford its cost. Government favors them and ignores the poor and middle class. Actually, the facts contradict that.

Sure, the wealthy extract privileges from government, but mainly they're its servants. The richest 10 percent of Americans pay about 55 percent of all federal taxes (and within that, the richest 1 percent pay 28 percent), says the Congressional Budget Office. About 60 percent of the \$3 trillion federal budget goes for payments to individuals—mostly the poor and middle class. You can argue that the burdens and benefits should be greater, but if the rich were all-powerful, their taxes would be much lower. As for the poor and middle class, they do have powerful advocates. To name three: AARP for retirees and near retirees; the AFL-CIO for unionized workers; the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities for the poor.

A final myth is that lobbying consists mostly of privileged access to pivotal legislators or congressional staffers—and that campaign contributions buy that access. Of course, this happens, but it's not the main story.

"Lobbying is much more substantive and out in the open than its ugly caricature. Lobbyists primarily woo lawmakers with facts," wrote Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, a veteran lobbying reporter, in *The Washington Post*. If lawmakers "see merit in a position and there is a public outcry in its favor, that's the way they tend to vote." Lobbying is modern marketing: trying to transform a group's narrow interest into something perceived, rightly or wrongly, as serving the broad "public interest." Think, say, of federal subsidies for corn-based ethanol as successful lobbying.

In 2008, there are about 16,000 registered lobbyists—people with sufficient congressional contacts that they're required to report under the 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act, says the Center for Responsive Politics. That's up about 50 percent since 1998. But there are also hordes of public-relations consultants, advertising managers, Internet advisers, policy experts (at think tanks and elsewhere) who are primed to influence government—and a huge support staff including, for example, "line standers" who grab scarce spots at crucial congressional hearings for high-priced lawyers. When political scientist James Thurber of American University counted all these others, the size of the influence-lobbying complex ballooned to 261,000.

Under Obama, this complex will expand. No one can doubt that it can capture public policy for private purposes. Sometimes this involves largely hidden and discreet favors: budget "earmarks," tax breaks or regulatory preferences. Though large for recipients, most are small in the context of government (all earmarks total less than 1 percent of federal spending). What really matter are the major policies that determine government's overall size and direction. Lobbying ensures robust debate on these issues, and whether the ultimate outcome is for good or ill, it's democracy in action.