



## What Do Lobbyists Really Do?

*Okay, you've convinced me. Now go out there and bring pressure on me. — Franklin D. Roosevelt*

What is the difference between “lobbying” and “advocacy”? These terms are sometimes confused. According to the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest:

The definition of lobbying generally involves attempts to influence specific legislation through direct or grassroots communications with legislators or their staff. Advocacy includes lobbying but covers a much broader range of activities such as executive branch activities, issue organizing, and nonpartisan voter engagement. One way of differentiating between the two terms is to understand that lobbying always involves advocacy but advocacy does not necessarily involve lobbying.

Lobbying is narrowly focused on influencing or persuading policymakers to support a certain position related to particular legislation. Other aspects of advocacy include several components: coalition building and management, community and grassroots organizing, fundraising and development, media outreach, decision-maker advocacy, research and education, and nonpartisan voter engagement. When properly engaged and informed, these activities can be used by folks like you and me to tackle some of the most daunting challenges affecting individuals, communities, corporations, and nonprofits. During the past few years, the field of lobbying has generated a great deal of attention. Members of the profession have been called hired guns, hookers, whores, prostitutes, and pimps. Lobbyists often are seen as evildoers who have ransomed deeply rooted American values related to the common good and equity for the cost of corporate efficiency and greed. Lobbyists, more than any other group, are held responsible for controlling the purse strings of policymakers and “fleecing” working folks. Some would have you believe that lobbyists feast on milked Indian tribes and snack on the stem-cell blood of babies. These assertions deliberately are over the top. Like most professions, the industry does have a set of unique challenges. But if you really think about it, lobbyists work for particular industries or interests and serve as an extension of those they represent.

While many have heard about lobbyists, few truly understand what they do and even fewer have ever met one. There are two types of lobbyists: (1) good lobbyists (white hats) and (2) bad lobbyists (black hats). Recall the image of the lobbyist who flew too close to the sun, the infamous Jack Abramoff. Remember the black fedora and trench coat he modeled during his trial

on federal fraud, corruption, and related charges. The line between the types is neither exact nor absolute, and which type a lobbyist is often depends on which side you're on. Mostly, the issues a lobbyist represents, rather than the industry pushing the effort, determine the classification. President Obama himself seems to have struggled with drawing a clear line. He had this to say about lobbyists and "special interests" in his book *The Audacity of Hope*:

I've never been entirely comfortable with the term "special interests," which lumps together ExxonMobil and bricklayers, the pharmaceutical lobby and the parents of special-ed kids. Most political scientists would probably disagree with me, but to my mind, there's a difference between a corporate lobby whose clout is based on money alone, and a group of like-minded individuals—whether they be textile workers, gun aficionados, veterans or family farmers—coming together to promote their interests; between those who use their economic power to magnify their political influence far beyond what their numbers might justify, and those who are simply seeking to pool their votes to sway their representatives. The former subvert the very idea of democracy. The latter are its essence.

*Where do lobbyists work?*

Lobbyists fall into several classifications. The major ones are law firms with lobbying shops, corporate lobbyists, and independent (or contract) lobbyists. Law firms work for clients in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, including major corporations, small businesses, municipalities, state governments, and trade and industry associations. Corporate lobbyists are employed by and represent corporations, such as GM, Google, Viacom, Nike, and Coca-Cola. Independent, or contract, lobbyists, the type often depicted and mentioned in popular media, strictly lobby. Unlike law firms, independent lobbying firms do not practice law and typically are not involved with regulatory matters. For a retainer fee, these lobbyists lobby on single or multiple public policy issues. They work in firms that range in size and revenue from the multimilliondollar entities that populate K Street to one-person shops.

*How old is the practice of lobbying?*

Lobbying can be traced to the earliest days of Congress. Numerous written accounts of lobbying activity were recorded in the 1790s.

*What is the relationship between lobbying and the US Constitution?*

Under the First Amendment of the US Constitution, citizens have a right to speak up. It states, "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Lobbying, then, is associated with the right of free speech and the right every American has to petition the government and to assemble peacefully.

*Who coined the term “lobbyist”?*

Washington lore asserts that the word came into being during the administration of Ulysses S. Grant. When people wanted to bend the ear of President Grant, they might have sought him at the historic Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue across from the White House. People seeking jobs, contracts, and particular positions in legislation would approach him in the lobby. Grant is said to have referred to them as “those damned lobbyists.” The late Robert C. Byrd in an exposé appearing on the US Senate website notes that lobbying dates back to the earliest days of the US Congress and the 1790s. Even before that, the word lobbies has been associated with the English House of Commons as far back as the 1640s.

*How is lobbying relevant?*

The lobbying profession derives relevance in three ways:

**Politics:** The United States is founded on democratic principles that favor a broad representation of voices.

**Mathematics:** The 535 members of Congress represent more than 300 million people.

**Economics:** Lobbying efforts increase the competitiveness of an idea in the marketplace of ideas.

*How many lobbyists work in Washington, DC?*

Lobbying has changed significantly in the past few decades. In Supercapitalism, former US Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich notes that during the 1950s, fewer than one hundred companies maintained a presence in Washington. By the 1990s, the number had grown to five hundred. Estimates of the exact number of people currently engaged in lobbying at the federal level vary, but the number quoted most often is about thirtytwo thousand. That is a little less than one lobbyist for about every ten thousand people.

*How much money is spent on lobbying?*

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the total amount spent on lobbying in 2007 reached about 2.7 billion dollars. This is substantially more than the 1.45 billion dollars spent in 1998, without adjusting for inflation.

*How much do lobbyists make?*

Annual salaries range from around \$70,000 to many millions. Thousands of lobbyists make less than \$100,000 annually. Those who command \$250,000 or more a year are able to do so because of two factors: what they know in reference to the policy issue they are engaged in to shape or influence and who they know in Congress, including both members and their staffs, and the executive branch. The more breadth and depth a lobbyist possesses in these areas, the higher that person’s pay.

*Can I lobby if I have relationships but no experience or vice versa?*

The best lobbyists have both sets of attributes. Having one without the other can get a person to a certain point, but running with the big dogs requires a combination of both. That is to say, having some game, hustle, and strong political relationships will kick open some doors, but the absence of an understanding of the issue, the federal process, or both will undermine your other strengths. Similarly, an individual may be the most knowledgeable person in the world on an issue, but absent any relationship with policymakers—elected officials, agency personnel, or congressional staff—translating that knowledge into a federal policy, program, or action is highly improbable.

*Are there any federal laws that apply to lobbying?*

By law, lobbyists in Washington, DC, are required to register their names, client information, and items that are the targets of their efforts with Congress. The Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA), as amended, now requires lobbyists to register “no later than 45 days after a lobbyist first makes a lobbying contact or is employed or retained to make a lobbying contact, whichever is earlier, such lobbyist shall register with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives.”

*How does the LDA define “lobbyist”?*

The law provides a specific and official definition of who and what a lobbyist is. The act says: “The term lobbyist means any individual who is employed or retained by a client for financial or other compensation for services that include more than one lobbying contact, other than an individual whose lobbying activities constitute less than 20 percent of the time engaged in the services provided by such individual to that client over a six-month period.”

*Does this definition of lobbying apply to all persons meeting the criteria?*

Certain people and entities are exempt from filing and reporting, including media professionals, public officials (elected, appointed, or employees of a federal, state, or local unit of government in the United States), and those who are retained for less than \$12,000 annually. More detailed analyses are compiled regularly by the Center on Responsive Politics and published primarily through its website, [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org).