**The Growing Power of Lobbyists**

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***There’s no dispute that lobbying is free speech, protected by the First Amendment. But there’s no doubt that Americans’ cynicism about Washington is fueled by the massive amounts of influence-seeking money that daily washes over Capitol Hill, into members’ campaign treasuries, and through the regulatory agencies.***

Back in 1982, Mississippi’s powerful U.S. Sen. John C. Stennis faced a tough re-election fight. Advisers told him he had an ace up his sleeve: as chairman of the Armed Service Committee, he could raise bundles of campaign cash from defense contractors. But Stennis balked. “Would that be proper?” he asked. “I hold life and death over these companies."

In the end, convinced he had no choice, Stennis relented. He used his position to fill his re-election coffers, and won.

It’s been three decades since that moment, and it’s safe to say that Stennis’s hesitation on principle is very hard to find in Washington these days. Quite the opposite: Members of Congress seek influential committee positions precisely because they guarantee campaign contributions and lavish spending by lobbyists.

It’s no secret that the average American feels pretty cynical about Washington. It doesn’t help that cynicism when the roughly 13,000 registered lobbyists in Washington last year spent $3.5 billion on their work, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

To be sure, they have every right to do this. Lobbying is free speech, protected by the First Amendment. And lobbyists serve a clear purpose: members of Congress today rely heavily on the information they provide. With multiple, complicated issues coming at them quickly, they and their staffs simply cannot cover every matter they need to understand. Lobbyists can be invaluable in alerting members to the impact of an arcane bit of legislative language. They help sharpen the debate on Capitol Hill. And they highlight the many different points of view around a given issue.

Yet most Americans are uneasy about lobbyists’ role. They do not think we have come to grips with the sheer amounts of money and influence-seeking that daily wash over Capitol Hill, into members’ campaign treasuries, and through the regulatory agencies.

On any given high-stakes issue, thousands of lobbyists converge on the Hill. Something on the order of 2,000 lined up to weigh in on the final version of last year’s financial regulation bill. And right now, as we speak, hundreds of lobbyists — many of them former congressional staffers or members of Congress and most of them dedicated campaign contributors — are making their case to the 12 members of the new congressional “supercommittee” charged with tackling the national debt.

"Supercommittee” members who had already scheduled dozens of fundraisers over the next few months are by and large sticking with them, although they’ll take place while they’re pondering the fate of the many causes and industries seeking their attention. “Lobbyists say word is already out in Washington that opening their wallets at fund-raisers could help get access to lawmakers to make their pitches,” The New York Times dryly observed.

Drawing a line between a particular contribution or bit of lobbyist spending and a particular vote may be difficult, but legislators would be superhuman to remain unaffected by these rivers of cash. The price tag for the 2010 midterm elections came to $4 billion. If you’re in Congress, you’ve no choice but to devote much of your attention to people with a lot of money to spend on elections.

And if you’ve ever wondered why the lobbyists bother, consider this. So far this year, commercial banks and finance and credit companies have spent about $50 million on lobbying, mostly dealing with financial regulators who are creating the rules required by last year’s financial reform law. That sounds like big money, until you realize that one of their efforts was focused on banking regulators, who in June saved the industry about $3.5 billion by easing restrictions on how much banks could charge retailers on debit-card purchases. That’s an excellent return on investment. And it’s why lobbyists now follow a given issue not only through every stage of the legislative process, but also keep after it once it’s out of the limelight — and in the hands of regulators.

It’s clear who gets dealt out of this process. You don’t find armies of lobbyists for the poor waiting outside committee rooms. And if there is a powerful anti-hunger movement on Capitol Hill, it’s escaped my notice. To be sure, issues that command broad public attention can make their way into the debate, whether or not lobbyists are involved. It took almost three years of the worst recession in memory for policy-makers and political leaders to start paying attention to job creation, but eventually the press of public concern became too much to ignore.

Yet those instances are rare. In Washington, the issues that tend to get taken up are ones that might mean hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars to a particular industry. They are complex matters, and usually invisible or of little obvious interest to the general public. But those are the issues on which lobbyists thrive.