

# Congress to K Street

by Donny Shaw

Corporations have many options for using their money to influence Congress — direct campaign contributions, SuperPAC funding, hiring lobbyists, funding political non-profits, and more. These tools alone give corporations a big advantage over ordinary citizens when it comes to influencing policy outcomes, but they are all amplified and made even more powerful by one practice that has become extremely common in American politics: the offering of lucrative job positions to individuals with personal relationships to people in high positions of power.

Using revolving-door lobbyists helps corporations get more bang for their buck in Washington. A recent report by two economists from the International Monetary Fund found that financial industry firms that hired lobbyists, who had worked for the member of Congress they were hired to lobby, had a 20 percent higher success rate in getting that member of Congress to vote in favor of their position. Furthermore, the study found that when companies used lobbyists who were connected to the member of Congress they were targeting, they were able to spend less to have the same impact.

The amount of money spent by companies with connected lobbyists did not affect voting patterns; it was simply the existence of the connections that made the lobbying more effective. So, corporations are often willing to pay premium prices for lobbyists with connections to the public officials they want to influence.

Accordingly, Washington insiders who go through the revolving door are typically rewarded with huge increases in pay. For example, Chris Dodd, who served as a senator for decades, earning \$174,000 per year, was hired by the Motion Pictures Association of America in 2011 as CEO and Chief Lobbyist just three months after retiring from the Senate, and is now earning an estimated \$1.5 million per year.

With relationships being so valuable to corporations and congressional personnel, spinning through the revolving door to work as a lobbyist has become one of the most common moves for people retiring from Congress. According to a report from the Center for Responsive Politics, of the 120 members of Congress who retired or were not re-elected in 2012 and have taken new jobs, more than half now work for lobbying firms. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Congress employs thousands of people as staff members for lawmakers and committees, and these individuals



graphic: Open Congress

are also considered highly valuable by corporate interests for their relationships and intimate knowledge of the inner working of DC policy making.

Even disgraced former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, convicted on corruption charges in 2006, admits to using the revolving door as one of his primary tools for influencing Congress. Here's how he described his strategy to CBS's "60 Minutes" program after being released from jail in 2012:

*"When we would become friendly with an office and they were important to us, and the chief of staff was a competent person, I would say or my staff would say to him or her at some point, 'You know, when you're done working on the Hill, we'd very much like you to consider coming to work for us.' Now the moment I said that to them or any of our staff said that to 'em, that was it. We owned them. And what does that mean? Every request from our office, every request of our clients, everything that we want, they're gonna do. And not only that, they're gonna think of things we can't think of to do."*

Given the power of the revolving door to make Congress more responsive to big corporations with lots of money to spend on political influence, there has been very little discussion in Congress on reforming the system. In 2007, as part of a larger ethics overhaul bill, Congress passed and President Bush signed a two-year "cooling off" period before ex-lawmakers and staff members could officially become registered lobbyists, but the bill was full of loopholes and has done little to restrict revolving-door influence. In the six years since, only a handful of bills have been introduced (out of tens of thousands total) to strengthen those restrictions and close the loopholes. So far all of the bills that have been introduced to limit the revolving door since 2007 have died in committee with few co-sponsors (if any) and no committee hearings.

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Convicted Lobbyist