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Opinion

Obama and ‘Special Interests’

Campaign contributors hold critical posts in the administration, while those who didn't donate a single cent are barred from service.

BY JOEL JANKOWSKY

For the past nine months, the Obama team has waged a campaign of political convenience against lobbyists.

Its policies against so-called special interests include: a refusal to accept lobbyists' campaign contributions, a ban on employing lobbyists within the administration, discouraging lobbyists' contact with government workers, new rules that will result in the public disclosure of every lobbyist who visits the White House, and a directive to exclude lobbyists from serving on department and federal agency boards and commissions.

All of this is meant to give the impression of purity. But this is illusory. At the same time that the White House has demonized lobbyists, it has allowed itself to be infiltrated by a different army—one made up of campaign contributors. These individuals can breeze past defenses designed to repel lobbyists.

Campaign contributors, especially those who bundled large contributions from others, have been embraced by this administration. Because they aren't formally registered or regulated in the way lobbyists are, they enjoy the benefits and privileges of serving in the heart of the administration. These contributors serve in critical foreign and domestic policy positions, as well as department and agency boards and commissions. Dozens of Obama for America National Finance Committee members have joined the administration. Most of them raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the campaign, according to the watchdog group the Center for Responsive Politics.

This inconsistent treatment does a disservice to federal policy making. Talented women and men who registered themselves as lobbyists under the Lobbying Disclosure Act are being excluded from contributing their expertise at a critical time in our nation's history.

The irony of this ploy is that it discriminates against those individuals with the greatest obligations of transparency: lobbyists who register and file quarterly reports on their activities, as well as biannual reports on their political contributions. These are all publicly available. Instead, the White House favors individuals such as political contributors who have no obligation whatsoever to inform the public of the interests they represent in their interactions with the administration.

What's more, this administration's treatment of lobbyists has only decreased openness in the policy-making system. Lobbyists are now limiting their activities and deregistering themselves in order to avoid being stigmatized.

If the administration truly wants to address its stated concerns about the influence of special interests, it should focus on what the public actually cares about: the influence of money on the policy-making

process. Excluding and disadvantaging professional advocates who have not given any money to the president's campaign while giving campaign contributors a free pass is bad policy.

The White House has repeatedly claimed that it wants "to change the way business is done in Washington." If the Obama administration is serious about this goal, it should apply the same rules to those who raised over \$10,000 for the president's campaign that already apply to lobbyists who did not contribute a cent.

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