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Foreigners Spend Hundreds of Millions of Dollars to Influence US Policy

By Stephanie Ho
 Washington
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The issue of lobbying, which is the process of trying to influence policy-makers in favor of a specific cause, has been under intense scrutiny in the United States because of a recent corruption scandal that is expected to involve lawmakers on Capitol Hill. One aspect of lobbying that has so far escaped close attention, however, is the efforts of foreign entities to affect U.S. policy.



Dennis Hastert
 (file photo)

There is bipartisan unanimity in Washington on at least one issue. According to both Republican House Majority leader Dennis Hastert and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, lobbying abuse is a problem.

HASTERT: "I have been deeply disturbed by those who have broken the rules of the House and in some instances have pleaded guilty to breaking the law."

LIEBERMAN: "Now is our opportunity and really our responsibility to restore the trust of the American people in their elected government and, to the best of our ability, scrub clean the point where money, politics and government meet in America."

So far, though, most of the media attention has focused on the corrupt lobbying activities of domestic interests. But, the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit organization that investigates public policy issues, says lobbying by foreign entities is also a problem.

"It's a very big issue," said Alex Knott, the Center's political editor. "We've found that nearly 100 countries have spent money lobbying our federal government. And, since 1998, they've spent \$624 million. That's a very large amount."



Senator Joe Lieberman

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Knott says the bulk of the money from foreign companies that lobby the U.S. government comes from other developed countries.

"Your top five countries are the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, Japan and France," he said. "And together, they've spent \$423 million lobbying the federal government since 1998."

Knott says the remaining lobby money comes from many other countries - some expected, some not.

"Well, there's definitely some countries that people often bat their eyes at [raise questions] when they see it," explained Alex Knott. "Saudi Arabia lobbies our federal government. South Africa lobbied our federal government. Countries like Vietnam lobbies our federal government. Kenya, Sri Lanka, Haiti, Pakistan."

One country that has come under scrutiny is Israel, which the Center for Public Integrity says spent more than \$3.6 million to lobby the U.S. government, from 1998 to 2004. At the same time, though, there is controversy surrounding the well-known group AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which is an American organization, but spends millions of dollars to lobby exclusively on behalf of Israel.

For American citizens, the Constitution guarantees the right to lobby.

"It's in the First Amendment. There's a right to petition to redress grievances, and that's where lobbying comes from," said University at Buffalo finance professor Michael Rozeff.

He says he believes it is natural for foreign companies and governments to also want to lobby Washington, to promote their country's commercial interests or to try to affect U.S. policy.

One way they do this is by hiring prominent former U.S. politicians to act on their behalf. In 2004, Bob Dole, former senator and presidential candidate, lobbied on behalf of Indonesia.

"You cannot condemn that," he said. "It makes sense. If the United States has gotten involved with Taiwan, then it's natural for Mainland China to want to influence the outcome. Or if the United States has jawboned [criticized] about the value of the [Chinese currency, the] yuan - it has done more than jawboned, it has made threats about what might happen if China didn't revalue the yuan, then it's natural for them [the Chinese] to lobby. You can't stop that."

Experts are mixed as to how successful lobbyists are. Rozeff adds, though, that as the United States has become a dominant world power, foreigners have taken greater interest in trying to influence U.S. decisions on a whole range of topics, from trade to arms sales

to taxation.

"The amount or extent of lobbying depends on the favors and the subsidies and the taxes and the regulations that the U.S. government can pass," said Rozeff. "And the bigger the government has got and the more activities it's gotten engaged in, the more the lobbying has done."

Rozeff says he is skeptical that any lobbying reforms ultimately passed by Congress will greatly affect foreign lobbying activities. He says the new regulations largely deal with issues like making all lobbying activities more transparent. This will make it harder to lobby, but, he adds, it won't stop people, whether Americans or foreigners, from doing it.



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