

What Does a Lobbyist (Actually) Do?

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Lobbying is an industry grounded in the First Amendment of the US Constitution—the right to petition your government.


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Dean Cannon—prominent lawyer, lobbyist, and former Speaker of the Florida House—once told me during the infancy of my career: “A good lawyer organizes and presents the clients’ facts to help them succeed under the existing law, but a good lobbyist seeks to reshape the law to help clients succeed with their current facts.” I’m a former campaign manager and political consultant who has also served as a legislative analyst in the Florida House.

Lobbying is an industry grounded in the First Amendment of the US Constitution—the right to petition your government. I have found that most folks have heard of lobbying and lobbyists, but many have a negative connotation of the practice, though they likely have no idea what we actually do. Lobbying is multifaceted, [touches a plethora of issues and policies](#), and in the end, is highly localized. What does a lobbyist actually do?

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The three major buckets of lobbying activity include

- 1 [changing the law](#) (whether via statute, administrative rule, or local ordinance)
- 2 preventing or altering attempts to change the law that would adversely affect the client
- 3 securing funding from a government source

To do these things effectively, a lobbyist must develop meaningful relationships with policymakers and staff who can actually pull the levers of government. You build these relationships via political involvement (e.g., fundraising and campaigning for candidates) and solidifying a reputation as an honest broker. How do lobbyists show honesty? By presenting only factual information and striving to be low maintenance with those they lobby. Lobbyists spend almost as much time at fundraising and campaign events as sitting in a legislative committee meeting or a city council meeting.

Different Types of Lobbyists and Their Overarching Goals

Most state-level lobbyists interact with a part-time legislature that convenes for a set amount of time. In contrast, federal and local government lobbyists spend much more time throughout the year interacting with policymakers in their official capacity. Florida, for example, has a 60-day legislative session, so most lobbyists spend the off-season developing new business, attending conferences, and visiting their clients to provide updates.

There are generally three types of lobbyists.

- 1 **In-House Lobbyist.** The in-house lobbyist is similar to an entity's general counsel. The company they work for is their master, and their focus is the industry in which the company operates.
- 2 **Trade Association Lobbyist.** The trade association lobbyist is an in-house lobbyist for a special interest trade group (e.g., the Florida Bankers Association or the American Medical Association). The numerous members of their association are their masters, and their focus is the industry their association represents.
- 3 **Contract Lobbyist.** The contract lobbyist has their own practice or works at a contract lobbying firm servicing a book of clients. Unlike the other two types of lobbyists, contract lobbyists have many masters—each of their separate clients on contract. They also have many focuses—the multitude of industries and interests their clients represent. Contract lobbying brings the most significant financial risks out of the three but is also the most lucrative, by far.

Interested in Lobbying? There Are Three Main Paths to Get You Started

For younger people on campaign trails or new attorneys interested in using their law degree in a new way, there are three significant ways to become a lobbyist.

- 1 having inside-government experience as a former elected official, formerly appointed official, or as a staffer
- 2 having meaningful relationships with those in power, such as a political consultant, can help build a lobbying career
- 3 having subject-matter expertise apart from inside experience (e.g., a growth management attorney, active in their respective special interest association, gets involved in policy in their state, eventually shifting their practice to include lobbying)

As the role and importance of government grow, so will the lobbying industry. The best part of lobbying as compared with traditional legal work? No billable hours!

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