

ROLL CALL

Early Obama Loyalists Get No Special Entree

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President Barack Obama benefited greatly from lobbyists' support during the presidential campaign, but the same hasn't been true for his K Street loyalists now that he's in office.

While Obama prohibited his campaign from accepting contributions from lobbyists and political action committees, he nonetheless took advantage of their campaign and policy experience to help him win the presidency.

Yet nearly five months after Obama took office, several Democratic lobbyists who supported Obama say their loyalty hasn't translated into any tangible benefits.

"People who supported Obama live by the same rules as everybody else, and they are challenging," said Tim Hannegan, president of Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates.

Hannegan threw his support behind Obama in early 2007. A transplant from Missouri, Hannegan has long held ties to the Illinois delegation.

While all lobbyists have had their wings clipped to some degree, Hannegan acknowledges that long-held friendships with administration officials do help.

"By the same token, there's a group of us who have been there since the beginning, and there is a higher level of trust there," he said.

During the campaign, Obama had a cadre of K Streeters who helped build support among their colleagues and corporate clients. Additionally, several lobbyists held regular policy meetings and helped strategize with the campaign on their policy positions.

Michael Williams of Credit Suisse, Tom Walls of McGuireWoods Consulting, Francis Grab of Washington Council Ernst & Young, and former Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), a consultant at Alston & Bird, all played a role in helping grow Obama's K Street following.

Along with Hannegan, Kevin Chavous, a partner at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal; Stan Fendley of

Corning; and Broderick Johnson at Bryan Cave also pitched in with their support.

The White House has taken what it says are unprecedented measures to try to reduce the prevalence of special interests within the administration.

“We have set up by far the toughest set of restrictions in history with respect to limiting special influence that is wielded by lobbyists and fighting for the public interest,” White House ethics adviser Norm Eisen said.

“That started with the refusal to accept lobbyist money in the campaign, it continued with the very clear message in the president’s executive order that all forms of revolving door influence in hiring would be banned and that there would be particularly stringent rules for lobbyists. ... We have added to that with the stimulus lobbying restrictions, including reaching for the first time both registered and unregistered lobbyist in the limitations on contact about competitive grants,” he added.

Despite not being able to take extra advantage of their White House ties, Obama lobbyists said they wouldn’t have withdrawn their support during the election season knowing what they know now.

“I don’t think there’s any question that the administration is challenging to lobby for everybody,” said Andrew Rosenberg of Ogilvy Government Relations. “I think that a lot of us knew that it might be tough going in, but most of us who supported Obama early on did so irrespective of our interest in someday lobbying his administration.”

Despite not having a direct line into the White House, lobbyists with Obama ties say the association has been good for business. The White House’s huge legislative agenda, moving on health care, energy and financial services regulatory reform, has increased clients’ desires to know as much as possible from the executive branch.

Johnson of Bryan Cave says that his firm has “certainly been busier” than ever. In addition to Johnson, the Missouri-based law firm recently brought on Obama campaign delegate director Jeff Berman.

Having Obama ties can often lead clients to expect that lobbyists can get better access and intelligence on moving legislation.

“I think the perception is there, and it’s obviously increased my workload, but I’m always clear with folks there are certain standards that our friends have set and we adhere to the letter of those,” Hannegan said.

Ogilvy’s Rosenberg agrees.

“There is some degree of frustration with the disinterest on the part of some administration officials in being particularly responsive to interest groups and the individuals who represent them, even though they may have very authentic and legitimate reasons for interacting with the federal government,” Rosenberg said.

Some lobbyists, like Bob Maloney of Maloney Government Relations, go even further, saying that Obama's lobbying policy for the Troubled Asset Relief Program has hurt his business.

Maloney, an Obama supporter, had a minority-owned business client, whom he declined to name, that was looking for help getting in touch with Treasury officials.

"Routinely in the past, I would have tried to make a call, but you don't get calls returned there," said Maloney, who later dropped the client because he wasn't able to assist them.

But that doesn't mean Maloney is giving up on Obama.

"The hope that he's given to the country outweighs any kind of disappointment that you may have of being able to perform a job as a professional," Maloney said. "I supported him early on because you hope to continue to have a professional relationship and you also really want him to do well."

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