

## **Estimating the Size & Nature of the Lobbying Industry in Washington**

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The seemingly simple question “How much lobbying is there in Washington?” is surprisingly hard to answer. After Congress passed the 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA), which ostensibly required all “lobbyists” to report their activities, the answer should be a no-brainer: just find the disclosure forms, and count them up.

The problem is that just about everybody in Washington knows that the lobbying disclosures don’t really disclose everything. The reason: the LDA definition of “lobbyist” is too narrow. If they want, lobbyists can fully comply with the law and do virtually the same influence-for-pay as “strategic policy consultants” and choose not to disclose.

### **Estimating the *Actual* Size of the Lobbying Industry in Washington**

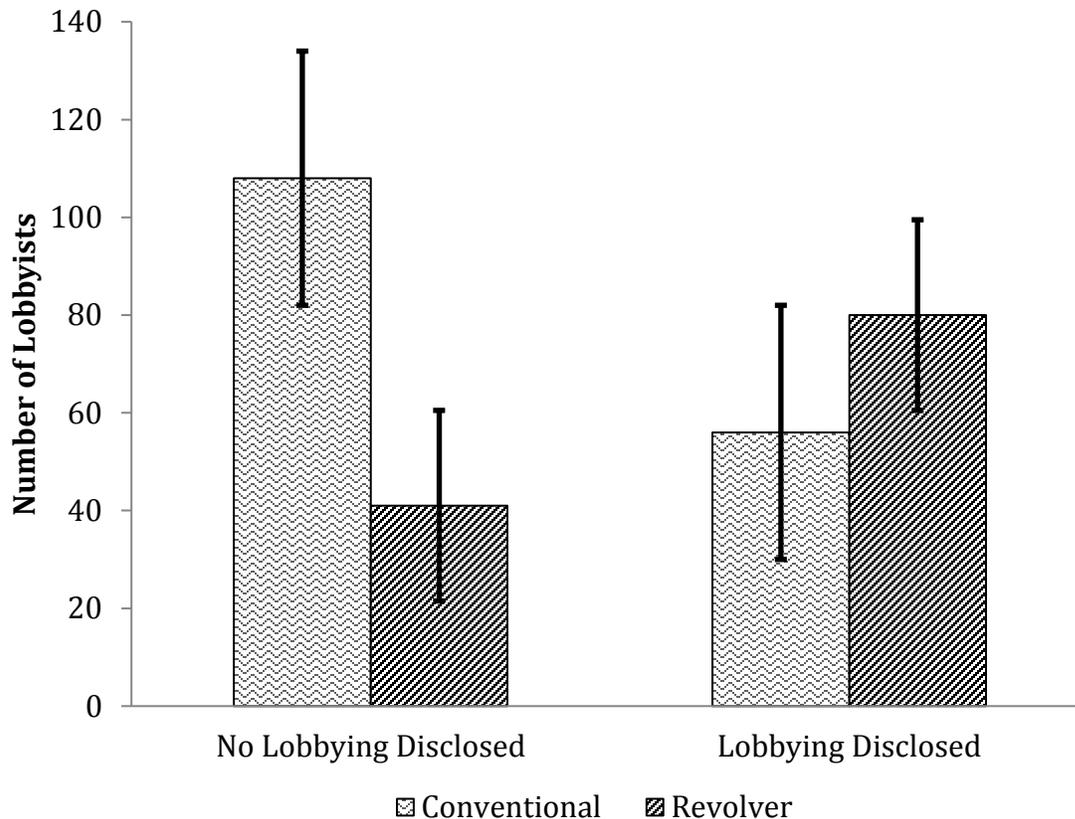
To try to get a better estimate of how many lobbyists there are, I recruited a small army of students—Meredith Gray (’13), Amy Roberts (’13), and Rachel Wein (’13)—to help me do the next best thing. I bought the lobbyists’ phonebook. When they weren’t writing papers or studying for exams, students would come to my office to do exhaustive internet searches on a random sample of people listed in the commercial directory Lobbyists.info. What they helped me discover was remarkable.

We found that about half of those involved in some form of policy influence did not disclose lobbying activities in 2012 (*LaPira and Thomas 2014*). That is, for every one lobbyist who discloses his or her activities, there is one so-called “shadow lobbyist” who does not.

All told, I estimate that organized interests spent about \$6.7 billion lobbying the government, not merely the \$3.3 billion disclosed to the government. Put another way, for every one member of Congress, the lobbying industry produces about \$12.5 million. By comparison, the average 2012 budget for member of the House of Representative’s office was only \$1.3 million. So, in a presidential election year, in a down economy, during arguably the least productive Congress ever, lobbyists accounted for more than nine times the typical House member’s official operating expenses.

### **Who Discloses, and Who Does Not?**

This is not exactly an easy question to answer because of the low disclosure rates. But, I can make some general inferences based on where they used to work. To do this, my students categorized lobbyists into those who’ve gone through the proverbial revolving door, and those who haven’t.



Note:  $N = 1,614$  lobbyists.

Revolvers (lobbyists who worked inside the federal government) are nominally more likely to disclose their lobbying, though 41% still choose to hide it. On the other hand, conventional lobbyists (those who were never on the federal payroll) are much more likely to be opaque about their influence activities.

What these data do not tell us is why some lobbyists disclose and others don't. With the generous help from a Mr. & Mrs. F. Claiborne Johnston, Jr. Endowment grant for junior faculty, I am currently exploring this question by talking to a variety of former members of Congress, lobbying firm managers, association executives, political lawyers, and reform advocates in Washington for a book on so-called revolving door lobbying.

What my research does tell me is that it's needlessly hard to figure how much lobbying there actually is in Washington. Fortunately, with the assistance of some very bright and motivated JMU students, I am beginning to shed some light on a profession that is often misunderstood and too easily maligned by politicians and pundits.

### Reference

LaPira, Timothy M., and Herschel F. Thomas III. 2014. "Revolving Door Lobbyists and Interest Representation," *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 3(1): 1-26.