



Lou Dobbs tonight

Lobbying Scandal and Loopholes

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Critics say the Republican and Democratic proposals to crack down on lobbying will have little effect on the culture of corruption on Capitol Hill. In fact, many doubt that Congress can actually be trusted to reform its own dealings with big money special interests.

Christine Romans reports

CHRISTINE ROMANS, CNN CORRESPONDENT: New lobbying rules mean absolutely nothing unless they're enforced.

SCOTT AMEY, PROJECT ON GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT: The issue here is, do we trust Congress and do we trust the people that they rely on, the lobbyists, to fix the system? And the answer is, you know, no.

ROMANS: Watchdog Public Citizen calls the current system "legalized bribery and says Republican and Democratic ethics proposals are "reform lite."

JOAN CLAYBROOK, PUBLIC CITIZEN: None of the proposals by the congressional leadership have any system for enforcing the rules for the new laws. And we don't believe that the ethics committees run by members of Congress have really shown that they can do this in an effective way.

ROMANS: What Public Citizen wants, no gifts, no subsidized luxury travel, no bundling of money from multiple sources, no campaign fund-raisers, and an independent watchdog with criminal sanctions for violators. After all, there are already plenty of ethics rules on the books and lax compliance.

The Center for Public Integrity found 84 percent of top lobby firms had failed to file all the proper documents and 14,000 documents that should have been filed with the Senate Office of Public Records are missing.

ALEX KNOTT, CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY: Most of the firms aren't filing all the stuff they are supposed to. And close to one out of five companies out there haven't filed -- hasn't filed the information that they're supposed to.

ROMANS: The number of lobbyists has doubled in the past five years, yet fewer than 50 people actually oversee the interaction between 14,000 lobbyists, 535 members of Congress, and thousands of their staffers. And it's not even their primary duty.

And then there is the definition of lobbyist. Some call themselves public relations consultants or researchers to avoid disclosure requirements.

ROMANS: You can write all the new rules you want, but many fear influence peddlers, they will always find a way around them.

Lou, Public Citizen is quick to point out it's not calling for a ban on lobbyists. After all, Public Citizen itself is a special interest. But their concern is that, without an airplane, private jet, a lot of money, and the ability to host big-dollar campaign dinners, you can't get your voice heard on Capitol Hill.

DOBBS: We're headed toward a situation, it seems to me, in which -- and it's interesting that no one has advanced the idea in this current scandal, but the public financing of campaigns may be the only answer. And it's one that's going to have to be taken a look at very seriously, I think, because no one has any faith in the nonsense that's being promoted by either party as "reform."

Christine Romans. Thank you very much

Many members of Congress who received donations from Jack Abramoff and his clients have been trying to give the money away. And some of them are doing so, giving the money to charities and other groups. But one senator's offer to donate Abramoff-related money has been turned down outright.

Senator Conrad Burns tried to give the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council \$111,000. But the tribe's council last night voted to refuse the money. Some council members said the money is tainted. One council member said the tribes are tired of being used by politicians, and they came up with what I think is a pretty interesting idea.

They think the money actually ought to be given back to the tribes who gave Abramoff and his associates the money in the first place. Intriguing concept.