Executive Branch Agenda 2013

Disclose All Lobbyist Meetings with White House Staff

The administration should make it a priority to put in place, through executive order or by championing legislation, a policy that ensures all substantive meetings between paid influencers and White House staff are disclosed in real-time, online, in downloadable and machine-readable format.

Background

President Obama took an unprecedented step when he voluntarily released the names of visitors to the White House by making WAVES (Workers and Visitors Entry System) and ACR (Access Control Records) records public. The policy has proven useful, at times providing a glimpse into lobbyists' access and influence to White House staff. But because the standard is voluntary, and because it uses tools designed for security rather than tools designed for disclosure, it provides an imperfect and incomplete picture of access and influence with top officials.

The voluntary system can be too easily circumvented. Because it only captures visitors to the White House, if an administration official wishes to keep a meeting with a lobbyist secret, he or she merely has to schedule it at a nearby location, such as nearby coffee shops and the Jackson Place meeting complex, not subject to WAVES or ACR. Phone calls are also used to avoid disclosure, as they provide no record of even the most substantive conversations between White House officials and influencers.

Rather than try to contort a security tool into a disclosure system, a new system should be put in place by Executive Order. Such an order could mimic the precedent set by the Obama administration when it used an EO to require online disclosure of substantive communications regarding stimulus and TARP funding. The order should make explicit that, with limited exception for highly sensitive meetings (such as the current exception for meetings with potential Supreme Court nominees), any substantive in-person or telephonic meeting with a registered lobbyist or other paid influencer should be reported. The report should include the visitors' names, the administration official with whom the meeting took place, and a brief description of issues addressed. The information should be electronically reported and made available to the public in real time, online. It should be in a format that is downloadable and machine-readable so that it can be re-used, analyzed and interpreted by others.