

Taxpayer-Funded Advocacy

Is the federal government using your tax dollars against you?

Would you believe that your federal tax dollars are being used by some organizations to lobby Congress to spend even more of your tax dollars? Sound incredible? Unfortunately, it's true, and it's costing taxpayers over \$39 billion per year!

Each year, the federal government provides over \$39 billion in grants to nonprofit organizations, which may then use these funds to lobby members of Congress and promote their political agenda.¹ These grants are received by groups ranging from the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) to the National Rifle Association (NRA).

Federal law prohibits using federal funds for lobbying. However, the law is vague and unenforceable. Because it does not define exactly what lobbying is or what practices are specifically prohibited, groups can find loopholes in the law that allow them to continue to lobby legislators.

While not all of the federal grant money may be used directly for lobbying activities, it can be used indirectly to get around the laws. An organization may use the federal grant money for legitimate, legal purposes, which frees up privately-donated funds to be used for lobbying activities.

No one is suggesting that these groups should not be allowed to lobby. Everyone should have the opportunity to express opinions to our elected officials. But taxpayers should not be forced to turn over their hard-earned dollars to help finance the promoting of a political agenda with which they may not agree. As Thomas Jefferson said, "to compel a man to furnish funds for the propagation of ideas he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical."² Instead of following Jefferson's words, our government today subsidizes lobbying by certain nonprofit organizations.

Providing funds directly or indirectly for lobbying can give a group more political power than it would have if it were forced to rely on private support and donations. If a small group of advocates can get access to federal funds, the group does not need broad-based, grass-roots support for its cause. It can use the federal funds to attempt to force its ideas and agenda on the taxpayers.

One well-known player in the taxpayer-funded advocacy game is the American Association of Retired Persons. AARP, the second largest nonprofit in the United States, received \$86 million from the federal government in one year.³ AARP may use those federal funds to promote its legislative and policy agenda, lobbying for even more federal spending. The National Taxpayers Union Foundation reports that if AARP's entire agenda were enacted, annual federal spending would increase by as much as \$1 trillion within a decade.

Because AARP receives a large portion of its revenue from sources other than its members, its leadership can promote its own agenda, even over the objections of AARP members. In 1994, AARP extensively lobbied in favor of the Clinton nationalized health-care legislation. However, an informal poll taken by AARP revealed that 82 percent of AARP members responding to the poll were opposed to the Clinton health-care plan.⁴

The National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC) is another group receiving tax dollars to lobby the federal government. NCSC receives 96 percent of its revenue — \$71.5 million in 1994 — from the federal government.⁵ One of NCSC's main beliefs is that entitlement spending is not the cause of the federal budget deficit. NCSC's Legislative Director, Daniel Schulder, said it is "absolutely false" that entitlement spending is out of control. Mr. Schulder believes that the federal budget deficit is the result of "massive and unprincipled tax cuts made in the early 1980s."⁶ In other words, the government should just take more and more of American families' wages to pay for out-of-control entitlement spending, rather than control that spending. And your taxpayer dollars are helping to promote NCSC's views!

What can we do to stop taxpayer-funded lobbying? In the last Congress, Senator Alan Simpson and Congressman Ernest Istook introduced legislation to limit the amount of money a federal grant recipient can spend on lobbying by cutting off federal funding to grant recipients who spend more than a certain percentage of their budgets for lobbying or political activities. Several attempts to enact this legislation were rebuffed by President Clinton and some members of Congress.

In addition to limiting the use of federal funds for lobbying activities, Congress should adopt a "Truth in Testimony" law. This would require witnesses who appear before a legislative committee to include in their testimony whether they receive federal funds, and if so, the amount of funds received and how those funds are used. However, care must be taken to ensure this requirement does not impose an unruly paperwork burden on legitimate nonprofit organizations.

The federal government should not force taxpayers to turn their wages over to the government to be used to promote ideas in which the taxpayers do not believe. Congress should adopt reforms to end taxpayer-funded lobbying activities.

¹ *Restoring Integrity to Government: Ending Taxpayer-Subsidized Lobbying Activities*. Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, July 12, 1995.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Congressional Quarterly*. July 29, 1995, p. 2240.

⁴ *Organization Trends*. Capital Research Center, December 1994.

⁵ *Guide to the Issues 1996*. Alabama Family Alliance.

⁶ *Organization Trends*. Capital Research Center, December 1994.