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## [Ted Cruz And Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Team Up To Ban Lawmakers From Lobbying](#)

"Let's make a deal," said Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y.

"You're on," agreed Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

The two lawmakers who have often been at odds found common ground in a place that often highlights polarizing opinions: Twitter. That's where Cruz and Ocasio-Cortez vowed to set aside their differences and work on new lobbying restrictions for lawmakers. Now an unlikely coalition is forming around their joint effort.

It started when Ocasio-Cortez [tweeted](#) Thursday morning that members of Congress shouldn't be allowed to become corporate lobbyists.

"At minimum there should be a long wait period," she wrote. Ocasio-Cortez cited a statistic from Public Citizen, in which the advocacy group reported that among former Congress members who move to jobs outside of politics, nearly 60% start lobbying or otherwise influencing federal policy.

It didn't take long for Cruz to chime in.

"Here's something I don't say often: on this point, I AGREE" with Ocasio-Cortez, Cruz stated. He went on to say that he has long called for a lifetime ban on former members of Congress becoming lobbyists.

"The Swamp would hate it, but perhaps a chance for some bipartisan cooperation?" [he asked](#).

By early afternoon, Ocasio-Cortez said she would [co-lead a bill](#) with Cruz — if there were no "partisan snuck-in clauses, no poison pills."

Cruz, who has previously argued with the freshman Democrat on Twitter, [agreed](#).

At least one politician from each side of the aisle came forward to support the pact: Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, [tweeted](#), "IN," and Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, [offered](#) to lead or co-sponsor a bill in the House.

Craig Holman, who lobbies on ethics, campaign finance and lobbying on behalf of Public Citizen, told NPR that it is "heartening" that Cruz and Ocasio-Cortez moved to bridge the deep partisan divide.

"I am not sure if Congress will be willing to adopt their proposed lifetime ban," Holman said in an email. He added, "but the sheer fact of a left-and-right agreement that the revolving door is a grave problem that must be addressed is going to move the ball forward."

Neither Cruz's nor Ocasio-Cortez's offices immediately responded to a question from NPR about whether their staffers had started to collaborate on potential legislation.

The so-called revolving door of Washington has been spinning for years. Dozens of former members of Congress have moved on to careers influencing the federal government on behalf of corporations, [according](#) to OpenSecrets.

Of the nearly four dozen lawmakers who left office in the wake of the 2016 election, "one in six became lobbyists," *The Atlantic* [has reported](#). The magazine said the number was even higher after the 2014 midterms, when "around one in four became lobbyists."

In the executive branch, at least 187 political appointees of the Trump administration previously worked as federal lobbyists, [ProPublica reported](#) last year. And many of them were put into positions supervising the same industries for which they had once lobbied.

Senators who leave office cannot become lobbyists for two years, under a law that was adopted in 2007. In the House, representatives face a one-year cooling-off period.

"The difference was due to a reform effort led by then-Sen. Obama back during the [Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007](#)," Holman said of that effort. "We tried securing two years for both chambers, along with a ban on strategic consulting during that two-year cooling off period, but House committee chairmen revolted and struck down the revolving door restrictions for the House."

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### [Federal Appeals Court Upholds Kentucky's Ban on Lobbyist Contributions](#)

A federal appeals court issued a [ruling](#) on Thursday upholding Kentucky's ban on contributions and gifts from lobbyists.

The lawsuit was filed by Republican State Senator John Schickel of Union and David Watson who ran unsuccessfully for the 6th District House seat in 2016.

They claimed several of Kentucky's campaign finance and ethics statutes violated their First and 14th Amendment rights. Several members of Kentucky's Registry of Election Finance and Legislative Ethics Commission were named as defendants in the suit.

In 2017, U.S. District Judge William Bertelsman struck down the ban, ruling that Kentucky's laws burdened "core political speech" and curtailed freedom of association.

The 6th Circuit Court of Appeals on Thursday reversed the ruling and said the measures "enacted to prevent corruption and protect citizens' trust in their elected officials, comport with the Constitution."

"This decision is a clear win for the integrity of the legislative process," said Judge Anthony Wilhoit, chairman of the Legislative Ethics Commission.

The General Assembly passed major ethics reforms in 1993 following the Boptrout scandal, an FBI investigation that resulted in about a dozen lawmakers being convicted of taking bribes to pass legislation that benefited the horse industry.

According to the Legislative Ethics Commission, no Kentucky legislator has been indicted or convicted of misusing their office in the 26 years since those sweeping reforms.

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### [Axne introduces ethics reform bill](#)

Iowa Congresswoman Cindy Axne is calling for a major overhaul in congressional ethics practices.

The West Des Moines Democrat Wednesday introduced an ethics reform package in the U.S. House. Speaking on KMA's "Morning Line" program earlier this week, Axne says the measure is

designed to address some of the wasteful spending she's witnessed in her first six months in Congress.

"I've seen some workings here that I don't think are the right way that we should be running this country--certainly not to get good outcomes for folks," said Axne. "I've seen a lot of what's wrong with Congress. So, I'm introducing an ethics reform package called 'Clean Up Congress,' to ensure that those of us who are elected officials are actually working for our constituents."

Axne says one portion of the bill would end the practice of congressional representatives from taking first class flights from their respective districts to D.C.

"I want to make sure we use our taxpayer dollars wisely," she said. "I spent a decade holding government accountable at the state, and I want to do that out here. That means we need to ensure our elected officials don't take first class. There's no reason to take luxury travel when so many people in this country don't have enough money to put food on their table."

Another provision prevents former members of Congress from becoming lobbyists.

"Sixty percent of members of Congress who lost their seats this last election in 2018 are now lobbyists," said Axne. "So, just six months after they lost their seats, they're now lobbying out there in Congress. So that influence that they're bringing here, I don't think it's the right way to be running our government. I don't think our founding fathers fought that we would have that happen."

Axne's bill would also block congressional representatives from receiving pay raises until they reduce the federal deficit to zero. You can hear the full interview with Cindy Axne on our "Morning Line" page at [kmaland.com](http://kmaland.com).

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### **[Democrats Take Aim at Silicon Valley. They Take Its Cash, Too.](#)**

Top Democrats in Washington and on the 2020 campaign trail are taking technology giants to task, calling them too big, too powerful and too careless about privacy. "The era of self-regulation is over," Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared on Monday.

But just as Ms. Pelosi's Democrats [were preparing sweeping House hearings](#) into the tech companies' concentration of power, some of her party's leading presidential candidates spent the weekend canvassing Silicon Valley to raise money from one of the nation's wealthiest and most liberal bastions.

Mayor Pete Buttigieg filled his Saturday with no less than four fund-raisers in the Bay Area, with co-hosts that included a former top Facebook executive and Google official. It was at least Mr. Buttigieg's third fund-raising trip to the region in the last three months. Senator Cory Booker was making his fourth trip to Silicon Valley to raise money since declaring for president in February. And Kamala Harris, California's junior senator, was on her sixth tour of the Bay Area fund-raising circuit this year.

The Democratic Party's intensifying alarms about the technology giants' monopolistic behavior, social media misinformation and lax privacy protections pose an unexpected dilemma for the 2020 field.

In a contest where purity tests on the left have already propelled leading campaigns to disavow super PACs and reject money from federal lobbyists, is tech money still politically acceptable? And can those who take it still be trusted to rein in the industry's excesses?

The progressive base has already soured on Wall Street, fossil fuel and pharmaceutical cash. Silicon Valley had been, until recently, one of the last relatively untainted wellsprings from which to draw campaign contributions. Now, some, particularly on the left, say tech money is suspect, too.

“Many of the candidates are trying to have it both ways,” said Rebecca Katz, a Democratic strategist from the party’s progressive wing, “but it will be hard to be taken seriously as strong on this issue when you’re taking money hand over fist from Big Tech.”

The fraught Democratic balancing act came into sharp relief last weekend.

House Democrats and Ms. Pelosi announced plans for an antitrust investigation into the largest tech companies and Senator Elizabeth Warren [posed in front of a San Francisco billboard](#) calling for breaking up Big Tech. Meanwhile, more than a dozen presidential candidates arrived in the city for the state Democratic convention. That was the public side of their trips; many maintained a busy private itinerary of fund-raisers powered in part by the immense wealth of the tech sector.

Senator Elizabeth Warren has aggressively gone after Big Tech, accusing companies like Amazon of overly controlling the online marketplace and the items sold in it. CreditMason Trinca for The New York Times

Senators Kirsten Gillibrand, Amy Klobuchar and Ms. Harris all had finance events around the Bay Area on Friday (while Mr. Booker zipped to Seattle to raise money at the office of [Nick Hanauer](#), a venture capitalist and early Amazon investor.) Mr. Buttigieg blitzed the region on Saturday, attending an event co-hosted by Chris Cox, Facebook’s former chief product officer and one of its initial engineers, and Scott Kohler, a corporate counsel to Google and former bundler for Hillary Clinton.

On Sunday, Mr. Booker returned for an event at the home of Jeff Jordan, a tech investor who had previously served as president of PayPal and OpenTable.

Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. was not in California over the weekend. But his finance team is tentatively planning a Silicon Valley swing at the end of June. In May, one of his Southern California event co-hosts was Eric Schmidt, the former Google chief executive.

Democrats mostly appear to be banking that the cash raised at such events outweighs any risk of backlash.

Mark Longabaugh, a Democratic strategist who advised Bernie Sanders in 2016 but is unaligned in 2020, said one reason is that most people still view tech giants “in a favorable light,” even if attitudes are shifting.

“They do not see these companies like Big Oil and the pharmaceutical companies,” he said. “There’s a distinction there.”

But as the Trump administration forges ahead with its own antitrust investigations into Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook, the Democratic reliance on tech money could provide President Trump a political opening to depict Democrats as beholden to the technology giants.

At a forum in San Francisco, the 2020 candidate Beto O’Rourke linked the industry’s money to [a law signed by Mr. Trump](#) allowing internet providers access to sell browsing data without explicit consumer consent. “If you follow the dollars, who paid for that access, that influence, and those outcomes, you begin to understand what’s at play,” he said.

Most of the 2020 Democrats are aligned on stiffening regulations and tech industry scrutiny. But Ms. Warren, in particular, has gone much further, accusing companies like Amazon of improperly controlling the online marketplace and the items sold in it. She has shunned holding fund-raisers as a presidential candidate, though she has raised money from Silicon Valley in the past.

Ms. Warren has surpassed Senator Bernie Sanders as tech's most insistent critic (he [recently embraced](#) breaking up Facebook, and he has hammered Amazon for its low wages).

Senator Cory Booker attended Stanford and once was an investor in an internet start-up. Credit Sarahbeth Maney for The New York Times

Ro Khanna, a California congressman who represents and has raised money heavily from Silicon Valley, serves as national co-chair of Mr. Sanders's campaign, though he is not fully aligned with Mr. Sanders on tech matters. Mr. Khanna said "calling for a sledgehammer approach" to breaking up Big Tech was "bad policy" when a "scalpel" is needed.

"People should, in my view, be proud of having support from technology leaders," Mr. Khanna said.

Silicon Valley is not monolithic. Some companies profit from user data. Some make money selling hardware. Others hope to break into markets now dominated by the giants. While Ms. Warren's unyielding rhetoric has alienated some tech leaders, political donors and executives in Silicon Valley said that there is a surprising sympathy for broader calls to increase oversight of the industry's biggest players.

"It's my sense that a lot of people in Silicon Valley think tech has gotten too big, that there's overreach," said Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder [who recently called for the company's breakup](#).

"There's a sense that people know that mistakes were made, and there's a search for solutions," Mr. Hughes added.

Mr. Hughes has contributed to four Democratic candidates this year: Mr. Booker, Ms. Warren, Mr. Buttigieg and Ms. Harris.

Three of the most aggressive candidates chasing Silicon Valley money have been Mr. Booker, Mr. Buttigieg and Ms. Harris, according to interviews with donors and event invitations obtained by The New York Times.

All three have substantial ties to the Valley. Mr. Booker attended Stanford and once was [an investor in an internet start-up](#) (another investor, the billionaire LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman, [recently hosted](#) a fund-raiser for Mr. Booker).

Mr. Booker also worked closely with Mark Zuckerberg when the Facebook founder donated \$100 million to revamp Newark schools, [an undertaking that got mixed reviews](#).

Mr. Buttigieg, who as a Harvard undergraduate was one of Facebook's first several hundred users, attended the university at the same time as Facebook's founders and has quickly cultivated relationships across the Valley.

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Ms. Harris, a Bay Area native, has raised the most of any 2020 candidate in the first quarter from employees of companies in the Internet Association, [a lobbying arm of the tech industry in Washington D.C.](#), according to an analysis of federal records.

Pete Buttigieg was one of Facebook's first several hundred users and attended Harvard at the same time as Facebook's founders. Credit Mason Trinca for The New York Times

Yet all have expressed concerns about Big Tech's dominance.

Mr. Buttigieg recently went on record in support of Mr. Hughes's call to break up Facebook, saying his old schoolmate had "made a very convincing case" about "these tech companies as monopoly giants."

"There needs to be tools to deal with that, up to and including preventing or reversing mergers," Mr. Buttigieg said in a recent podcast.

Going back several years, Mr. Booker has questioned the dominance of companies including Google and Amazon. In a recent interview with The Times, Mr. Booker said he was planning to roll out an internet security platform and has deepening concerns about companies "able to use your data for your profit." But when asked about Ms. Warren's demand that big tech firms be broken up, he replied in a recent television appearance, ["That sounds more like a Donald Trump thing to say."](#)

In the Senate, Ms. Harris aggressively questioned Facebook executives last year, and this year she said on CNN that government officials "need to take a serious look at breaking up Facebook."

Matt Stoller, a fellow at the Open Market Institute and a critic of the consolidation of power in the tech industry, said there were differences in the deference that candidates gave to Silicon Valley leaders.

"Buttigieg and Harris treat them like they're special," Mr. Stoller said. "Warren treats them as they're just citizens. Booker goes back and forth."

Ali Partovi, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who hosted a fund-raiser for Mr. Booker, said he sees no evidence that donors are dissuaded by talk about a crackdown on Big Tech.

"I find that people vote and donate in service of their principles and beliefs about what they think is right, not just their self-interest," Mr. Partovi said.

The tech economy remains a crucial source of funds for congressional Democrats, too.

Later this month, Ms. Pelosi will collect checks at a San Francisco law firm that has represented tech companies, asking for as much as \$19,600 to help seven of her vulnerable California colleagues. That same day, her political committee is holding an event at the home of John Thompson, the current chairman of Microsoft and the former chief executive of Symantec.

The price to chair the luncheon: \$50,000.

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### [\*\*A wealthy Iraqi sheikh who urges a hard-line U.S. approach to Iran spent 26 nights at Trump's D.C. hotel\*\*](#)

In July, a wealthy Iraqi sheikh named Nahro al-Kasnazan wrote letters to national security adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging them to forge closer ties with those seeking to overthrow the government of Iran.

Kasnazan wrote of his desire "to achieve our mutual interest to weaken the Iranian Mullahs regime and end its hegemony."

Four months later, he checked into the [Trump International Hotel](#) in Washington and spent 26 nights in a suite on the eighth floor — a visit estimated to have cost tens of thousands of dollars.

It was an unusually long stay at the expensive hotel. The Washington Post obtained the establishment's "VIP Arrivals" lists for dozens of days last year, including more than 1,200 individual guests. Kasnazan's visit was the longest listed.

"We normally stay at the Hay-Adams hotel," Kasnazan, 50, said in a recent interview with a Post reporter in Amman, Jordan, where he lives in a gold-bedecked mansion and summons his servants by walkie-talkie. "But we just heard about this new Trump hotel in Washington, D.C., and thought it would be a good place to stay."

Kasnazan said his choice of the Trump hotel was not part of a lobbying effort, adding that he came to Washington for medical treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, about 45 miles away. Kasnazan, who socialized with State Department officials while in Washington, has set up several new companies in hopes of doing business with the U.S. government.

His long visit is an example of how Trump's D.C. hotel, a popular gathering place for Republican politicians and people with government business, has become a favorite stopover for influential foreigners who have an agenda to pursue with the Trump administration.

A gallery of would-be foreign leaders — including exiles and upstarts who cannot always rely on a state-to-state channel to reach Trump's government — have been gliding through the polished lobby of the Trump International Hotel since it opened in 2016.

[\*\[Saudi-funded lobbyist paid for 500 rooms at Trump hotel after 2016 election\]\*](#)

A few weeks before Kasnazan checked in, a pair of exiled Thai prime ministers spent the night. A few weeks after, a Post reporter saw a Nigerian presidential candidate holding court in the lobby. None stayed as long as Kasnazan, the leader of an order of Sufi Muslims who said he served as a paid CIA informant in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

These visits offer proximity to Trump's political orbit — as family members, advisers and fans [regularly pass through the hotel](#) and snap selfies at the bar — while putting money into a hotel the president still owns.

"We saw all the Trumpers," said Entifadh Qanbar, a Kasnazan spokesman and aide who was frequently with him at the hotel. "Many ambassadors, many important people. We didn't talk to them, but we saw them in the hallways."

Stays at the Trump International Hotel in Washington offer proximity to President Trump's political orbit. (Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post)

The downtown D.C. hotel has emerged as a bright spot in the president's portfolio at a time when there are [signs of declining revenue](#) at some of his other properties. Lobbyists for the Saudi government paid for an [estimated 500 nights](#) at the luxury hotel just three months after his election. Executives from the telecom giant T-Mobile [booked](#) at least 52 nights there last year.

The president's ability to profit from foreign customers, in particular, while in the White House has drawn sharp criticism. The Trump Organization is battling a pair of lawsuits, including [one filed by Democratic members of Congress](#), alleging that the business it does with foreign governments violates the Constitution's emoluments clause, which bars payments to presidents by foreign states.

The company, which runs the hotel, declined to answer questions about how much Kasnazan paid for his stay, or whether it had informed anyone at the White House about the sheikh's long visit. The company said it donated the profits of his stay to the U.S. Treasury as part of a voluntary policy aimed at countering claims that the president is in violation of the emoluments clause. Critics argue that the policy is insufficient, saying that the Trump Organization does not explain how it calculates its foreign profits or identify its foreign customers.

The Trump Organization did not say how much the profits were from Kasnazan's stay and did not explain why in his case it applied the "foreign patronage" policy, which it has said is for business from foreign governments. He holds no government office, and his spokesman said he paid the bill himself.

The White House and the National Security Council declined to comment about the visit. State Department officials said that they were not aware of any official meetings between their personnel and Kasnazan at that time, but that they could not say whether informal meetings were held.

Kasnazan willingly acknowledges an ambitious political agenda: He's advocating for a U.S. military confrontation with Iran and wants U.S. help to blunt Iranian influence in Iraq. He also considers himself a viable candidate to become president of Iraq — even though others view him as a minor political figure.

In addition, Kasnazan has recently registered several companies in the United States to provide private security, oil field services and construction, and said he is eager to do business with the Trump administration.

"We are looking for opportunities," he said.

Kasnazan checked into the Trump hotel on Nov. 30, a day after his brother, a former Iraqi trade minister, was sentenced in absentia to seven years in prison on graft charges. Kasnazan is also facing charges, said Judge Abdulsatter al-Beriqdar, a spokesman for the Iraqi judiciary.

"Once they are in Iraq, they will be arrested," al-Beriqdar said.

Kasnazan denies the corruption allegations and says the charges are politically motivated.

"We saw all the Trumpers," said Entifadh Qanbar, left, with Kasnazan. The Kasnazan aide, who was frequently at the hotel, added: "Many ambassadors, many important people. We didn't talk to them, but we saw them in the hallways." (Tanya Habjouqa/NOOR for The Washington Post)

Kasnazan said he paid for a suite and one additional room at the Trump hotel, and stayed there with his wife and children until Dec. 26. Qanbar, the spokesman — who for years worked for Ahmed Chalabi, a deceased Iraqi dissident who helped foment the Iraq War — declined to specify the cost but estimated that it was a "couple thousand" dollars per night.

Suites at the Trump hotel range from about \$1,000 to \$2,000 per night; at the Hay-Adams, they are about \$840 to \$1,840 per night.

During his recent stay in Washington, Kasnazan said, he socialized with some of the State Department's Middle East experts outside of the hotel. One of them, Col. Abbas Dahouk, recently retired as a senior military adviser at the department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and previously served as a military attache at the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia.

Dahouk said he viewed Kasnazan's visit to the Trump hotel as an effort to make "himself available to talk about Iraq and to speak truth to power," while seeking U.S. support for countering Iranian influence in Iraq.

"It's easier to meet people" at the hotel, he said. "Maybe indirectly to also show support to Trump."

"From his perspective, Trump is America," Dahouk added.

### **'Mind-blowing' intelligence**

Nahro Kasnazan displays a portrait of his father, Sheikh Mohammad al-Kasnazan, in his home in Amman. (Tanya Habjouqa/NOOR for The Washington Post)

Kasnazan comes from a prominent Sufi Muslim family from the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. His father, Sheikh Mohammad al-Kasnazan, is the Kurdish leader of a branch of the Sufi order, a form of Islamic mysticism. In ceremonies, the Kasnazan Sufis pray and chant and sometimes perform self-mutilation.

Kasnazan and his siblings had been imprisoned during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. They turned to the Americans for help in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion — and ended up assisting U.S. intelligence officials.

They met regularly with CIA officers working from small bases in the Iraqi region of Kurdistan and recruited dozens of informants from within their Sufi network who worked in Hussein's military and intelligence services, as described in the 2004 book "[Plan of Attack](#)," by Bob Woodward.

The intelligence provided by two Sufi brothers and their network was "so rare, so mind-blowing," that the CIA gave them the code name ROCKSTARS, according to Woodward's book. The book does not identify him by name, but Kasnazan confirmed that it described his family's network.

For their efforts, the CIA paid more than \$1 million per month, Kasnazan now estimates.

"It was expenses for the network," he said.

The CIA declined to comment.

During the war, Kasnazan turned his network into a private security company, the Iraqi Establishments Protection Company, winning contracts to protect U.S. military bases and oil installations, according to U.S. military documents he provided to The Post.

The family's Sufi militiamen were put to work guarding oil companies and U.S. military installations, such as ammunition depots and the Civil-Military Operations Center in the northern city of Kirkuk.

The business was just one part of his ambitions. He considered himself a natural choice to be president of Iraq. He viewed his Sufi order, which includes Sunnis and Shiites, as unifiers — a peaceable alternative to Iranian expansion on one side and al-Qaeda extremism on the other.

But in 2005, Kasnazan was banned from participating in elections by the commission that purged Saddam Hussein's former party loyalists from government. In the years since, Kasnazan's political party, the Coalition for Iraqi National Unity, has not established much of a footprint.

A portrait of Sheikh Mohammad al-Kasnazan is displayed at his son's home in Amman. (Tanya Habjouqa/NOOR for The Washington Post)

The family's most notable political achievement happened in 2014, when Kasnazan's brother, Milas Mohammed Abdulkarim, was chosen to be trade minister. But that quickly ended in scandal.

Iraqi authorities issued arrest warrants for both brothers in October 2015 following an investigation of bribes and illegal benefits. The case involved alleged kickbacks connected to rice purchases for Iraq's national food ration system.

In November 2018, Milas Abdulkarim was convicted of graft and sentenced to seven years in prison. He is living in Iraqi Kurdistan now, his brother said.

Kasnazan, whose case is still open, according to Iraq's judiciary, said the allegations against his family were "fabricated" by political enemies.

He now lives in exile in Amman, in a palatial home amid marble, crystal and oil paintings. His furniture is leafed in gold; angel figures perch on the rims of giant vases.

When particularly reverent guests arrive, he lets them bow and kiss him on the feet, according to a video he shared with The Post.

### **A hard-line position on Iran**

Trump's arrival in the White House shifted the U.S. government's view of Iran closer to Kasnazan's. He was in favor of Trump's decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal. He supports the approach of Bolton, who advocates for regime change in Iran.

Kasnazan said that he opposes a full U.S. invasion, and that he wants "surgical U.S. military strikes" against Iranian military and intelligence installations.

"You ask why would we want war, but in fact we are not in peace — the violence against Sunnis in Iraq has never stopped," Kasnazan said in an interview. "Any retreat from Bolton's policy on Iran will lead to a breaking down of America's reputation in front of the world."

He shared with The Post copies of letters he sent to Bolton and Pompeo last summer in which he praised the U.S. government's hard-line approach toward Iran and offered policy recommendations.

In the letters, Kasnazan wrote that he was "very encouraged by President Donald Trump's objectives to stop Iranian aggression and expansion in the region."

A spokesman for Bolton declined to comment. A State Department spokesman said the department was not aware of the letters.

Kasnazan said he supports "surgical" U.S. military strikes against Iran. (Tanya Habjouqa/NOOR for Washington Post)

During Trump's time in office, Kasnazan said he has met with State Department officials on various occasions, as well as visited think tanks to advocate for his position against Iran.

During his long stay at the Trump hotel in November and December, Kasnazan said, he saw members of Trump's family at the property, as well as Trump's lawyer Rudolph Giuliani and Fox News Channel personalities. But he said that he didn't speak with them and that he never saw Trump.

While in town, Kasnazan attended a retirement party for Dahouk, the State Department adviser.

Dahouk described Kasnazan as an influential figure who has met with officials from the Near Eastern Affairs and policy planning bureaus.

“He had an audience, and many concerned officials valued his perspective,” Dahouk said. “His agenda was to provide an alternate source of atmospherics about what’s going on in Iraq from a person who has many devoted followers on the ground.”

Whether Kasnazan’s networking had any effect on the administration is unknown. But the sheikh said he feels encouraged by the Trump administration’s approach to his home region.

His spokesman said he plans to return to Washington soon — although he hasn’t yet chosen a hotel.

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### **[Emails show MDOT let lobbyist steer report on gravel shortage for Michigan roads](#)**

When Michigan gravel companies wanting to open or expand a mine are opposed by neighbors objecting to the noise and dust, they point to a 2016 consultant's study, commissioned by the Michigan Department of Transportation, that says the state is running out of gravel to rebuild its busted roads.

But in fact, the Michigan Aggregates Association (MAA) — the lobbying organization for the sand and gravel industry, which is pushing for legislation that would severely restrict the ability of local governments to deny permits for new or expanded gravel mines — was behind the study, records show.

The group recommended the consultant MDOT hired, set out the scope of work and how to price the study, and even spelled out the expected findings, according to emails and other records obtained under Michigan's Freedom of Information Act and provided to the Free Press. The group also had a role in initiating the study, which an MDOT official repeatedly described in emails as a report "the Director commissioned after talking with the Michigan Aggregate(s) Association."

MDOT’s major contribution was paying for the nearly \$50,000 study with taxpayer dollars, records show.

“We presume it goes without saying (but we’ll say it anyway!) that we expect the conclusion to be that there is, in certain definable regions of the state, a looming shortage of aggregates that needs to be addressed,” Michigan Aggregates Association President Doug Needham said in a May 2016 email to then-MDOT director Kirk Steudle.

That's exactly what the hastily assembled report, the first phase of MDOT's Michigan Aggregates Market Study, concluded.

Many Michigan communities angry about losing local control over mining operations

Access to sand and gravel in and around residential neighborhoods is a growing flash point across Michigan, with current or recent permit applications producing strife in Kalamazoo, Lapeer, Jackson, Berrien, and Washtenaw counties, to name a few.

Such controversies are only expected to increase as MDOT anticipates a major funding boost that will require more supplies of these materials close to the crumbling roads it wants to repair. Part of the problem, according to one expert, is that Michigan hasn't mapped its geology

since 1915, so developers, often unwittingly, continue to build homes on top of valuable and needed aggregate resources.

Some experts are critical of the 17-page report, which found that the state faces looming shortages in southeast Michigan and the middle of the state, including the Thumb area.

But ever since its release, Needham has pointed to the report as an objective basis for expanding gravel operations over local objections.

"I'm astounded," said Ronald Barnard, a resident of Metamora Township in Lapeer County. Barnard testified last December against expanding a nearby gravel pit at a Senate hearing where Needham cited the MDOT report in his testimony.

"That's really underhanded political dealing, I think. I find it disgusting that they're able to utilize the power of MDOT to give them a leg up on legislation that would allow them to be just the robber barons of gravel."

In Washtenaw County's Lyndon Township, which dodged the opening of a mine in one of the community's recreation areas when the developer opted for a land swap, Supervisor Marc Keezer said he's not surprised to hear that MDOT sees its interests as aligned with the gravel industry, over residents.

"MDOT does road and transportation networks," Keezer said. "Why would they want to restrict their ability to do that at affordable prices? I think it all comes down to money."

Questioned by the Free Press on Friday about his involvement in the preparation of the MDOT report, Needham hesitated for several seconds when asked who recommended FMI Corp. of North Carolina, the company MDOT hired to prepare the report.

"I'm trying to remember," Needham said.

"Wasn't it you?" a reporter asked.

"Yes," he said. "I gave them a list of (two) companies that we thought could do this kind of work."

Needham agreed the MDOT stamp gave the report more credibility.

"If we do a report and put it out, everyone would say, 'Hey, it's an aggregates (association) study,'" and give it less weight, Needham said. "It's nice to have an independent third-party review of what we are saying."

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Asked whether MDOT acted as an independent third party in the way it commissioned the report, Needham said: "When we were offered or asked for advice we gave it," but "we did not write it, we did not proof it, we did not finalize it, we did not pay for it."

MDOT defends study even as one official says it promotes a 'hostile land grab'

MDOT spokesman Tim Fischer said the study was a specialized one, so it made sense for the agency to turn to the industry to identify potential consultants and work parameters.

Steudle, the former MDOT director who now works in private industry, did not respond to an email. But he sent a May 28 letter to lawmakers in which he rejected unspecified criticisms of the report, which he described as "fully accurate."

But one MDOT official pushed back in 2017, when his bosses were preparing to commission a second phase of the report — only to be shot down.

“Forgive my ideology, but I have been under the longstanding impression that our research monies are intended for scientific study,” MDOT concrete operations and material engineer John Staton said in a Sept. 21, 2017, email to his supervisor, Jason Gutting.

“The MAA approach is simply to use a hastily assembled report (to be commissioned by MDOT) to engage in legislation that takes permitting authority away from local agencies so that the current aggregate producers ... can expand their current footprint via hostile land grab,” Staton wrote.

Instead of paying for a study themselves, the gravel companies “need MDOT to commission the work in order to provide them political cover,” he wrote in the email, which called for a more scientific approach to the second phase of the report.

Staton’s supervisor, Gutting, the administrator of MDOT’s construction field services division, emailed back that “your points are all valid,” and “I think your path was the right way to go.” However, “industry is requesting something different.”

The Phase 2 report is expected to be released in three to four weeks, Fischer said. It is based in part on the findings of the Phase 1 report and is being conducted by the second consulting firm recommended by the MAA — Public Sector Consultants of Lansing — records show.

Lobbying organization has repeatedly touted the report as an objective look at its needs. Needham has frequently touted the Phase 1 report without disclosing his association's involvement in its genesis.

"Read the MDOT report because that is a company that went in and actually investigated this industry across the state," Needham told the House Transportation Committee on May 21.

In June 2018, interviewed in *Aggregates Manager* magazine, Needham said "we are faced with increased local resistance at opening and expanding mining operations," which is contributing to a looming shortage. MDOT "initiated a study and corroborated industries' concerns," he said.

On Nov. 28 of last year, Needham cited the study when testifying before the Senate Natural Resources Committee in favor of Senate Bill 1210, which would have limited local governments' ability to prohibit or restrict gravel-mining operations.

"Municipalities ... continue to engage in a variety of tactics that have resulted in both the prevention of new mines, and increased costs in the operation of existing mines throughout Michigan," Needham testified.

Testimony on SB 1210 centered on the project Barnard is worried about — a proposed 500-acre gravel mining operation on property in Metamora Township leased from the Boy Scouts of America.

The bill's sponsor, former state Sen. Tom Casperson, R-Escanaba, withdrew the bill during the lame-duck session in the face of strong opposition.

But similar legislation is expected to be introduced by state Rep. Triston Cole, R-Mancelona. He confirmed Tuesday he is working on legislation, but couldn't say when it would be introduced.

Though the legislation has mostly been associated with the Metamora project, it would apply statewide. Needham said there are examples across the state of local governments refusing to

grant permits to gravel operations without good reasons. He cited pending applications in Jackson County's Grass Lake, Berrien County's Oronoko Township and Kalamazoo County's Richland Township as examples.

Lawmaker touts study in support of bill to ease the granting of gravel permits

Cole, too, has touted the MDOT report to justify the legislation he plans to introduce that would restrict the ability of local governments to stop owners from mining sand or gravel on their property.

He shrugged off questions about the MAA's involvement in preparing the study, saying: "We need as much access to sand and gravel as possible ... to fix our roads."

Bear Priest, clerk of Richland Township, said his municipality is required to allow the mining in certain areas, despite strong public opposition. His concern is that a state law could take away the site plan controls the township still has, including ones controlling issues such as hours of operation.

For MDOT to pay for a study over which a lobbying organization had such influence "seems a little odd," Priest said.

A review of the MDOT study, commissioned by the Metamora Land Preservation Alliance and conducted by Arizona geologist William Langer, said it is "overly simplistic" and "fatally flawed" because it considers only future production from sand and gravel mines that now have permits, without considering new mines that will come on-line. The study includes no data on how many new permits have been granted in recent years, or how many denied.

"If one assumes that no new sand and gravel operations will be permitted, it is inevitable that predictions based on that assumption will demonstrate that an area will eventually run out of sand and gravel reserves," Langer said.

John Yellich, director of the Michigan Geological Survey at Western Michigan University, said the study is OK as far as it goes, but it relies on unverified information from existing producers. A better way to go — and what Yellich proposed to MDOT — would be to survey and map the state, at least in areas close to major transportation routes such as highways, to determine where the aggregates are and in what quantity. Then, residential development could be restricted close to undeveloped reserves, he said.

The geological maps Michigan uses today are based on a state survey from 1915 because the state has not wanted to pay the millions needed to update it, Yellich said.

Wallace Marshall, a senior consultant with FMI Corp., the Raleigh, North Carolina, company that wrote the report, said his company has an excellent reputation and he has no concerns about undue industry influence over the report.

Emails show how lobbying organization influenced the study MDOT commissioned

The emails released by MDOT show the study first came up in May 2016. Needham emailed Steudle on May 18. He said he was following up on a discussion they had May 13 to set out "issues/questions/concepts that should be addressed" in a request for proposals for an Aggregate Market Study.

"The basic question to be addressed in the study is: Are there enough 'permitted' aggregates (sand, gravel and limestone) to meet the intermediate to long-term demand (10-50 years) anticipated as a result of needed infrastructure improvements in the state, especially as a result

of the road funding package and other major projects already planned?" Needham wrote Steudle.

On May 22, Steudle forwarded Needham's email to some of his top officials, including Gutting, saying he was concerned about "the availability of reasonably priced aggregates in the future," and wanted to quickly prepare a report to present to then-Gov. Rick Snyder's 21st Century Infrastructure Commission, which released its report in November 2016.

"I asked MAA to send me their thoughts on what a study would look like from their vantage point," Steudle told his officials. "Please use this as a starting point and put out an RFP for a quick study of this issue. We need a final or draft final by the end of Sept or early Oct," and "I would guess MAA might have some thoughts on who has the background for this type of work." Steudle's officials took that directive to heart, records show.

On May 31, Gutting emailed Steudle, saying discussions with Needham had produced an outline for a two-phase report, based on dialogue Needham had with potential researchers. The first phase would define the major aggregate suppliers and detail how much supply they had left, based on present permits and MDOT construction needs, Gutting said. The second phase would examine the impact of aggregate companies not being able to expand into newly permitted areas to supply material.

"Sounds like a great plan," Steudle replied. "Fast track the process please."

On June 7, while working on the request for proposals, Staton forwarded a draft to Needham and asked: "Doug, can you take a look at the attached draft and see whether or not I perverted your intent? Some of what you provided was a little overlapping so I took liberties to do some creative editing." However, "I may have took it in the wrong direction, though," Staton wrote.

Needham recommended two firms — FMI, which was selected, and Public Sector Consultants, which did not submit a Phase 1 proposal but was later selected for the Phase 2 report. MDOT needed a third company and added the Michigan Geological Survey, but found its Phase 1 proposal "went in a distinct different direction than the focus of the study," and "FMI was considered by our selection team to be the only viable vendor for this work," Staton said in an Aug. 26 email.

On June 13, Staton asked Needham how he should price the study, informing Needham that the cost had to be kept below \$50,000 so the job could be fast-tracked, without the need for additional and time-consuming state administrative approvals.

"John, let's go with a rough assumption of 200 hours at a blended/average rate of \$245.00/hour," Needham emailed back.

On June 14, Staton again asked Needham for help, this time on what the required qualifications for the consultant should be.

After making some edits to the list of qualifications Needham sent him, Staton emailed Needham a copy of those changes, asking: "Sound OK?"

Needham periodically queried MDOT officials on the progress of the report.

"John, any word on when this report will be ready for distribution??? Thanks, Doug," Needham emailed Staton on Nov. 16.

Tensions rise over the scope of the second phase of the study being released shortly

Tensions arose in July, August, and September, when it was time to define the scope of work for the second phase of the study.

Staton told his supervisors he wanted to use "scientific mapping technology," and not just surveys of existing aggregate producers engaged in a "simple land grab."

"I discussed this research proposal with MAA," Gutting responded the same day. "This is not what they had in mind so unless we specifically want this research completed I would recommend we withdraw the submittal. They are going to send something ... on Phase II."

As Staton was edged out of the work on the second phase, Needham on Feb. 8, 2017, sent a proposed scope of work for the Phase 2 study to another MDOT official, Kim Avery, the director of bureau field services.

"As highlighted in phase I, Michigan is facing a looming shortfall with permitted local aggregate supplies and this phase will help determine both the potential short and long-term impacts if the foreseeable shortfall is not addressed," Needham told Avery.

Staton, Gutting, and Avery did not respond to emails seeking comment.

Jeff Williams, CEO of Public Sector Consultants, said he was unaware that the MAA had recommended his company as a consultant. Williams said PSC decided not to bid on the first phase of the report because it would be too difficult to get the required data from the industry. He said he trusts the company that did the first phase was able to do so, because PSC's second phase report builds on the work done in the first phase.

"We've not felt any influence or pressure in any adverse way," Williams said.

MDOT Director Paul Ajegba, who was appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to take over the helm of the agency on Jan. 1, said the emails illustrate "robust discussion and debate" that MDOT employees are encouraged to engage in.

"Having said that, our responsibility is to the taxpayers, and we will review our internal processes to validate or correct our approach," Ajegba said.

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### **[Swing-state Democrats see trouble in proposed pay hike](#)**

House Democrats hailing from swing districts are split over leadership's decision to move forward with a spending package that would allow members of Congress to get a pay bump for the first time in a decade.

The House is slated to vote next week on a nearly \$1 trillion spending package that would allow a cost-of-living increase for lawmakers and staff to go into effect.

Members of both parties, including House Majority Leader [Steny Hoyer](#) (D-Md.), have spoken up in recent years about the need for competitive salaries to help reduce the exodus to higher-paying K Street lobbying jobs.

But some of the most vulnerable House Democrats who only arrived on Capitol Hill five months ago are pushing back, fearing the pay raise won't go over well with the public.

Freshman Rep. [Cindy Axne](#) (D-Iowa) unveiled an ethics reform package on Wednesday that would prevent members from receiving a pay raise until Congress eliminates the deficit, as well as ban them from becoming lobbyists.

“As I look at this, I see a Congress that’s dysfunctional,” Axne said. “I think until we get the dysfunction under control and our deficit under control and down to zero, then Congress people don’t deserve a raise.”

Axne even said she’d reject the pay raise if it went into effect, pointing to her decision to withhold her pay during the government shutdown earlier this year.

“I would refuse this increase as well,” Axne said.

Rep. [Tom Malinowski](#) (D-N.J.), who also flipped a GOP-held district last fall, told The Hill that a pay raise would be a “hard thing for me to support” when Congress isn’t getting bills aimed at doing the same for their constituents signed into law.

“So long as legislation that lowers the cost of living for my constituents is not going through — which is largely the fault of the U.S. Senate right now — I’m not comfortable with my pay increasing,” Malinowski told The Hill.

Rank-and-file members of Congress currently make \$174,000 annually. Members of leadership earn more, with the Speaker making the highest salary at \$223,500 while the majority and minority leaders pull in \$193,400.

The Congressional Research Service estimated that the 2018 salary level for rank-and-file members would be \$208,000 had Congress instituted the annual cost-of-living increases as outlined in a 1989 ethics law over the past decade.

Lawmakers opted to forgo an annual raise in 2010, during the recession, and haven’t taken a pay raise since.

Lawmakers are slated to receive a 2.6 percent, or \$4,500, increase in January 2020.

Some swing-district Democratic freshmen, including Reps. [Dean Phillips](#) (Minn.) and [Sean Casten](#) (Ill.), say they’re prepared to defend the pay raise as a way to help attract the best people to Congress.

Both pointed to their business backgrounds where annual cost-of-living increases are typical, arguing Congress shouldn’t be any different.

“I want to be able to attract the best and brightest to this job, because that’s how I ran my company. When I ran my company, I paid a competitive wage. I didn’t tell people, come here because you’re so committed to our mission that you’re willing to, you know, sleep on your friend’s couch and work for peanuts. It’s horrible that we force people to do that,” Casten said.

Phillips pointed to the number of lawmakers — estimated to be in the dozens — who sleep in their offices to save money on pricey Washington-area rent.

“Those are the truths. If they’re presented in a factual way, I think Americans might come to the same conclusion, that we can do better,” Phillips said.

“Coming from the private sector, we afforded our employees cost-of-living increases, because the cost of living increases every year. And it shouldn’t be an annual battle or a battle in every Congress to do so. So in general terms, do I concur with inflation-based cost-of-living increases for hardworking employees in any enterprise, public or private? Yes.”

But like Axne, Phillips wouldn’t accept a pay raise for himself. A spokesman for Phillips later told The Hill after this story was published that if a cost-of-living increase is ever enacted, the Minnesota Democrat would donate his raise back to the Treasury.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, fellow freshman Rep. [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (D-N.Y.) also expressed support for the pay raise, arguing it's consistent with policies like advocating for a minimum wage increase.

"I think that all people in the country should get cost-of-living adjustments," Ocasio-Cortez told The Hill. "I think the entire country should have the health care that we have. I think the entire country should have cost-of-living adjustments. Which is why I'm comfortable with it because I fight for those consistently across my platform."

Lawmakers further argue the change is necessary to retain top staff who can't make more than their bosses on Capitol Hill.

"We're in a very competitive environment with the lowest unemployment in a generation. And we feel that, too. Because people can get better-paying jobs elsewhere," said Rep. [Gerry Connolly](#) (D-Va.), who represents thousands of federal workers in Northern Virginia. "And for key staff, that's a problem."

Lawmakers' salary is well above the typical American's: The Census Bureau reported last year that the median household income was \$61,372 in 2017.

Despite the six-figure salary, lawmakers say it can be difficult to maintain two residences, back home and in the major metropolitan area of Washington — especially if they hail from places that also have a high cost of living.

But that's drawing little sympathy from Senate Republicans and the House GOP campaign arm.

The National Republican Congressional Committee suggested that the current lawmaker pay "just isn't enough for these socialist elitists."

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman [Richard Shelby](#) (R-Ala.) dismissed the idea, saying his GOP colleagues would not support a congressional pay raise.

"I don't think that'll go anywhere in the Republican conference," he said.

Sen. [Ben Sasse](#) (R-Neb.) blasted House Democrats for the proposal, writing in a statement that "These jokers couldn't hold down a summer job at Dairy Queen pulling this kinda crap."

Lawmaker pay wasn't always used as a wedge issue. The 1989 law that establishes the annual cost-of-living increases came as part of a bipartisan ethics package.

At a hearing held by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress last month, former lawmakers recalled how they wouldn't attack incumbents on the campaign trail for voting for annual pay raises.

In 1990, for example, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee wouldn't fully support the Democrat running against [Newt Gingrich](#) (Ga.), then the House GOP whip, because he made an issue of Gingrich's vote in favor of a congressional pay raise. That came as Gingrich only won reelection narrowly.

"We would not permit our candidates running against an incumbent to attack that incumbent on the basis of his vote on the issue of pay," said former Rep. Martin Frost (D-Texas), who chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee during the 1996 and 1998 election cycles.

Hoyer acknowledged this week that the pay raise is necessary even if the politics might be tough.

"I don't think there's ever a time when people think it's very good politically to do," Hoyer said.

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## **CHURCH SPENT \$10M ON LOBBYISTS TO FIGHT LAWS BENEFITTING ABUSE VICTIMS**

A new [report](#) released Tuesday reveals that, over the past eight years, the Catholic Church has spent \$10.6 million in the northeastern United States to fight legislation that would help victims of clergy sexual abuse seek justice.

“At the most basic level, we were inspired by frustration,” says attorney Gerald Williams, a partner at Williams Cedar, one of four law firms that jointly commissioned the report. “We represent hundreds of people, who have truly been victimized by clergymen in the Catholic Church. We’ve heard a lot about the church’s desire to be accountable and turn over a new leaf. But when we turn to the form where we can most help people and where we can get the most justice — the courts of justice — the church has been there blocking their efforts.”

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In New York, for example, the Catholic Church spent \$2,912,772 lobbying against the Child Victims Act, which Governor Andrew Cuomo ultimately signed into law on February 14, 2019. The act gives survivors more time to seek justice against their abusers, increasing the age at which victims are able to sue from 23 to 55.

Similarly, in Pennsylvania — where in 2018 a [grand jury report](#) detailed evidence of more than 300 priests credibly accused of sexually abusing more than [1,000 children](#) — the Catholic Church spent \$5,322,979 lobbying to keep current restrictions in place on the statute of limitations in which victims can seek criminal or civil charges against their abusers.

The report, [CHURCH INFLUENCING STATE: How the Catholic Church Spent Millions Against Survivors of Clergy Abuse](#), was commissioned by Seeger Weiss LLP, Williams Cedar LLC, Abraham Watkins and the Simpson Tuegel Law Firm and is believed to be the most comprehensive analysis of the Church’s campaign to fight statute of limitations legislation. Courtesy Williams Cedar LLC

The funneling of such a large chunk of money to the Church’s lobbying arm, the Catholic Conference Policy Group, with the intention of combating reform that would benefit sexual abuse victims seems directly counter to recent statements the Church has made publicly, vowing to take accountability.

In August 2018, [Pope Francis himself said](#), “The pain of the victims and their families is also our pain, and so it is urgent that we once more reaffirm our commitment to ensure the protection of minors and of vulnerable adults.”

However, according to the report, “[CHURCH INFLUENCING STATE: How the Catholic Church Spent Millions Against Survivors of Clergy Abuse](#),” the Catholic Church has not only continued to invest in lobbying against the interests of victims, their investments in this area have actually increased over the years.

“Church Influencing State” / Courtesy Williams Cedar LLC

“They make a lot of positive statements, but when [the Church](#) literally puts its money where its mouth is, it’s on the side of self-protection and not help for the survivors,” Williams told CBS News. “I believe the church has a long way to go to show that it stands with survivors. I believe that these data indicate that it’s not standing with the survivors, that in fact it’s standing against the survivors.”

The data in the report is based entirely on public filings in the individual states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. And Williams believes it's "likely" that at least some of the money used by the Catholic Church to combat extending the statute of limitations for survivors came from Sunday collections from the faithful.

"It's hard for us to tell just from the raw numbers, but it's likely," he says. "We can't say for certain where the money comes from. We can only say that it's a lot of money that could be spent for more constructive purposes."

Every proposed amendment detailed in the report would benefit all victims of child sex abuse, not only those abused at the hands of the Church. And yet, more than \$10 million of the Catholic Church's money has now gone to fighting statute of limitation extensions for those victims, as well.

"I hope, frankly, that Catholics who come across this report take away from it the same thing that I take away from it, as a Catholic born-and-raised person myself," Williams told CBS News. "I had 16 years of Catholic education. Catholicism teaches a lot of important and noble values, but the institution has really acted in ways contradicting those values. So, what I take away from this are really two emotions: sadness and anger. The sadness is a little stronger even than the anger. But maybe if Catholics themselves get angry about this, then maybe the institution itself will change... It just has to change. And that has to start with members of the church."

At the time of this article publishing, neither the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, nor the Archdiocese of New York had responded to CBS News' request for comment.

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### **[Senate passes bill to ban lobbyist contributions to most Maine politicians](#)**

A bill to ban lobbyists from donating to most state politicians is one step closer to passage.

The Senate approved the bill Wednesday, sponsored by Sen. Justin Chenette, D-Saco, that would ban lobbyists from contributing to legislators, legislative candidates, the governor, and gubernatorial candidates.

It also bans contributions to their political action committees.

Currently, lobbyists are allowed to give to lawmakers when they are not in session.

Chenette says it's about getting money out of politics.

"We absolutely have to have a government that's fighting on behalf of Maine people rather than lobbyists," said Chenette. "And I think what I see over the last seven years being in the Legislature is that we have a system that's fundamentally broken. We have lobbyists that are using campaign contributions to gain undue influence and access over our legislative leaders."

The bill now goes back to the House for further votes.

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### **[Tech Giants Amass a Lobbying Army for an Epic Washington Battle](#)**

Faced with the growing possibility of antitrust actions and legislation to curb their power, four of the biggest technology companies are amassing an army of lobbyists as they prepare for what could be an epic fight over their futures.

Initially slow to develop a presence in Washington, the tech giants — Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google — have rapidly built themselves into some of the largest players in the influence and

access industry as they confront threats from the Trump administration and both parties on Capitol Hill.

The four companies spent a combined \$55 million on lobbying last year, doubling their combined spending of \$27.4 million in 2016, and some are spending at a higher rate so far this year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks lobbying and political contributions. That puts them on a par with long-established lobbying powerhouses like the defense, automobile and banking industries.

As they have tracked increasing public and political discontent with their size, power, handling of user data and role in elections, the four companies have intensified their efforts to lure lobbyists with strong connections to the White House, the regulatory agencies, and Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

Of the 238 people registered to lobby for the four companies in the first three months of this year — both in-house employees and those on contract from lobbying and law firms — about 75 percent formerly served in the government or on political campaigns, according to an analysis of lobbying and employment records. Many worked in offices or for officials who could have a hand in deciding the course of the new governmental scrutiny.

The influence campaigns encompass a broad range of activities, including calls on members of Congress, advertising, funding of think-tank research and efforts to get the attention of President Trump, whose on-again, off-again streak of economic populism is of particular concern to the big companies.

Last month, the industry lobbying group, the Internet Association, which represents Amazon, Facebook and Google, awarded its Internet Freedom Award to Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and White House senior adviser.

“They are no longer upstarts dipping a toe in lobbying,” said Sheila Krumholz, the executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics. “They have both feet in.”

Facebook and Google are dogged by concerns over their handling of consumer data, harmful content and misinformation. Amazon's rapid expansion has been met with [unease over labor conditions](#) and the company's effect on small businesses. Apple's control over its app store makes it hard for new apps to get discovered, some rivals say.

Earlier this week, the threat of government action became more real, [driving down their stock prices](#). The House Judiciary Committee announced a broad antitrust investigation into big tech. And the two top federal antitrust agencies [agreed to divide oversight](#) over Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Google as they explore whether the companies have abused their market power to harm competition and consumers.

“Unwarranted, concentrated economic power in the hands of a few is dangerous to democracy — especially when digital platforms control content,” Speaker Nancy Pelosi tweeted after the Judiciary Committee announced its investigation. “The era of self-regulation is over.”

The industry's troubles mean big paydays for the lawyers, political operatives and public relations experts hired to ward off regulations, investigations and lawsuits that could curtail the companies' huge profits. The companies all had earlier ties to Democrats but have also worked to develop closer relationships with Republicans.

Facebook is paying two lobbyists who worked for Ms. Pelosi, including her former chief of staff Catlin O'Neill, who now serves as a director of United States public policy for the social media company.

Ms. Pelosi received nearly \$43,000 in total donations for her 2018 re-election campaign from employees and political action committees of Facebook, Amazon and Alphabet, Google's corporate parent — each of which ranked among her top half-dozen sources of campaign cash. She had been a champion of tech companies, which have a robust presence in her district in California.

“There is a burgeoning awareness that there is a big problem with the dominance of big tech,” said Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri. Credit Sarah Silbiger/The New York Times  
But her support for the industry appeared more tenuous last month, when she said Facebook's refusal to take down a doctored video of her that made her appear drunk demonstrated how the social network contributed to misinformation and enabled Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Google is paying two contract lobbyists who worked as lawyers on the Republican staff of the House Judiciary Committee. One of the lawyers, Sean McLaughlin, also served as a deputy assistant attorney general under President George W. Bush.

“Having conducted congressional investigations from the inside, Sean is able to counsel clients on how to respond to them from the outside,” reads [Mr. McLaughlin's biography](#) on the website of his firm, Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP, which was paid \$50,000 by Google to lobby Congress during the first three months of the year, according to [lobbying records](#).

The Washington office of Amazon, whose chief executive, Jeff Bezos, has drawn regular criticism from Mr. Trump, is led by a former Federal Trade Commission official, Brian Huseman. And its roster of outside lobbyists includes three Democratic former members of Congress — Norm Dicks of Washington, Vic Fazio of California and Kendrick B. Meek of Florida — as well as two former Justice Department lawyers.

One of them, Seth Bloom, was a trial lawyer in the department's antitrust division in the late 1990s before going on to work on antitrust issues for the Senate Judiciary Committee's Democratic staff. He went on to lobby for Amazon, including in connection with its purchase in 2017 of the grocery chain Whole Foods, which required a [review of competition concerns](#) by the Federal Trade Commission. Amazon paid [\\$30,000 to Mr. Bloom's firm](#) to lobby Congress on issues “related to competition in technology industries” during the first three months of the year.

In that span, Amazon also paid [\\$70,000 to the lobbying firm](#) of a top Trump fund-raiser, Brian Ballard, to lobby Congress and the administration. Top-tier lobbyists in Washington can make millions of dollars a year.

One of the lobbyists on the account for Mr. Ballard's firm, Daniel F. McFaul, worked on Mr. Trump's presidential transition team and then briefly as chief of staff for Representative Matt Gaetz, Republican of Florida. Mr. Gaetz is a member of a House Judiciary subcommittee that is [planning a set of hearings](#), testimony from executives of top companies and subpoenas for internal corporate documents.

The head of the Justice Department's antitrust division, Makan Delrahim, was paid as a contract lobbyist by Google in 2007. He is facing pressure to recuse himself if the department pursues an investigation of the company. Credit Stephen Voss for The New York Times

Even before Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri, was sworn in at the beginning of the year, the tech companies reached out to him. Mr. Hawley had investigated Google as his state's attorney general, and the industry saw him as a threat.

Facebook called, as did Twitter and Google. This winter, in Mr. Hawley's windowless temporary office, the lobbyists for the companies came to meet with Mr. Hawley's aides, arguing that their companies contributed to Missouri's economy and were innovative businesses that did more good than harm for consumers, according to a person familiar with the meetings.

"There is a burgeoning awareness that there is a big problem with the dominance of big tech," Mr. Hawley said in a recent interview. "Big tech may be more socially powerful than the trusts of the Roosevelt era, and yet they still operate like a black box."

The internet giants have learned from the hard lessons of Microsoft, which was caught flat-footed with a sparse lobbying presence in the 1990s when federal antitrust officials called for a breakup of the software giant. Google has especially been forced to deal with regulatory issues, both [in Europe](#), where it has been hit with three multibillion-dollar penalties, and in the United States, where it escaped an Obama administration-era Federal Trade Commission investigation [without any action being taken](#).

The companies have separately argued that they have not violated antitrust laws. Google and Facebook say that their services are free and do not harm competitors and that consumers can turn to alternative search and social networking apps. Amazon has said it has a large share of online commerce but only a small fraction of the overall retail market. And Apple argues that the majority of apps in its store are free and that the company rejects only apps that violate its policies on hate speech and pornography, for instance, or try to take too much data from users.

"We have seen these tech companies escape accountability for years," said Lisa Gilbert, the vice president of legislative affairs for the government watchdog group Public Citizen. The group, which has called for more user data protections and for breaking up Facebook, [published a study](#) last month showing that in the last two decades, 59 percent of top Federal Trade Commission officials who left the agency entered financial relationships with technology interests regulated by it.

The head of the Justice Department's antitrust division, Makan Delrahim, was [paid as a contract lobbyist by Google in 2007](#) to win approval for its acquisition of DoubleClick, which had drawn antitrust concerns. He is now facing pressure to recuse himself if the Justice Department pursues an investigation of the company.

Former Representative Darrell Issa, Republican of California, last year. He attended a Google holiday party in December after questioning the company's chief executive at a House hearing earlier in the day. Credit Erin Schaff for The New York Times

Federal employees are barred from working on specific issues that affect their former private sector employers or interests, and generally face "cooling off" periods of one to two years after leaving government, during which they cannot lobby their former colleagues. But there are all manner of loopholes.

Ms. Gilbert's group has called for stricter conflict-of-interest provisions. She said that "in this moment of enhanced scrutiny, the tech companies are going to be looking for those who have the Rolodexes that matter to try to stop regulation and legislation of the type that's required to protect consumers."

It is hard to avoid the increasing prominence of the companies in Washington.

They finance some of the most influential think tanks from across the political spectrum, sometimes [making it difficult for critical voices](#) to win funding.

Google and Facebook have provided funding to [hundreds](#) of influential trade groups and [think tanks](#) across the ideological spectrum, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Conservative Union, the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress.

In the spring of 2018, Facebook moved into a new office with room for as many as 200 lobbyists, policy experts and engineers for its Washington-based security team. With a full cafeteria, soaring ceilings, wall-size abstract art and concrete floors, the office copies its look from Facebook's Frank Gehry-designed headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif.

Apple is preparing to move into a bigger office, and Google recently opened one of the city's biggest corporate lobbying offices.

Amazon also opened a new office near Capitol Hill, where it regularly hosts policy events with members of Congress. And Amazon recently announced that it would place a [second corporate headquarters](#) across the Potomac River from downtown Washington, in Arlington, Va.

Last December, in the evening after Google's chief executive, Sundar Pichai, testified for the first time at a House hearing, the company hosted a holiday party with hundreds of government officials at the trendy Wharf along the Potomac.

Scores of lawmakers, including Representatives Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Democrat of Florida, and Darrell Issa, Republican of California, gathered under neon displays of YouTube and Google. Mr. Issa, who had questioned Mr. Pichai earlier in the day and was within weeks of leaving office, was waiting near one of several open bars for a cocktail.

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### [Florida FARA Case Leaves Troubling Precedent](#)

On May 7, 2019, a federal District Court in the Southern District of Florida [ruled](#) that an American company, RM Broadcasting, must register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act ("FARA") for its agreement to broadcast radio programming from Rossiya Segodnya (meaning "Russia Today"), a Russian state-owned news agency. Although the decision has received some attention because it is the latest victory in the Department of Justice's efforts to force [Russian state-owned media organizations and their agents to register](#) under FARA, it has much broader implications. The FARA legal analysis underpinning the Court's decision has significant shortcomings, reflecting RM Broadcasting's failure to assert and brief perhaps its strongest legal defenses.

RM Broadcasting buys and sells radio airtime, including from WZHF 1390 AM in Washington, D.C. In late 2017, RM entered into a services agreement to provide for the broadcasting and transmission of Rossiya Segodnya's radio programs over WZHF. Notably, RM agreed to sell essentially the entire broadcast schedule on WZHF, except for hourly station identifications, and to transmit Rossiya Segodnya's programming in whole and unaltered. In June 2018, the FARA Unit informed RM that the government concluded the company was required to register under

FARA. RM disagreed and brought an action for a declaratory judgment that it was not required to register.

RM raised a number of arguments that the Court found inapplicable or unpersuasive. For example, RM argued that its services agreement did not give rise to an agency relationship under common law principal-agent theories. Unfortunately, there is very clear precedent that FARA's "agent of a foreign principal" is a statutory test that is wholly distinct from common law agency. RM also argued that it was not broadcasting radio programs because the FCC licensee – from which RM bought airtime – did the actual broadcasting. FARA, however, covers actions of an agent taken "directly or indirectly," and the agreement required RM to provide broadcasting services to Rossiya Segodnya, which it did.

From a FARA perspective, RM failed to raise directly perhaps its strongest argument: the commercial exemptions to FARA. Although RM made arguments that alluded to the commercial exemptions, such as stating that it simply buys and sells radio airtime in "an arms-length commercial business transaction," it raised these issues in the context of its alleged agency relationship with Rossiya Segodnya, rather than as an exemption to registration. RM never specifically cited and explained the commercial exemptions to FARA, their history and purpose, or the reasons that the exemptions could preclude registration. The Department of Justice, which had no incentive to help RM strengthen its case, also failed to address the commercial exemptions in its briefs. As a result, the Court's opinion did not address these critically important issues.

FARA legal analysis requires consideration of three aspects of the law. First, whether there is a relationship between a purported agent in the United States and a foreign principal outside the United States. Second, whether the activities of the agent are within four categories of activities covered by the statute. Finally, third, whether the activities are covered by an exemption that eliminates the registration requirement. It is essential to consider all three components. Additionally, because the triggering language of FARA is particularly broad, it is critical to consider the exemptions.

Unfortunately, because neither RM nor the government addressed the commercial exemptions to FARA, neither did the Court. The Court's analysis in the May 7 decision covers only whether RM has a relationship with Rossiya Segodnya and whether its activities are covered by one of the four statutory triggering activities that implicate FARA. On these points, the Court concluded that the services agreement made RM an agent of a foreign principal, and concluded that RM's activities were within the literal scope of the statutory term "publicity agent" under FARA. But the Court's analysis stopped there and did not consider whether the activities were exempt under a commercial exemption.

There are two commercial exemptions to FARA. First, the statutory commercial exemption provides that private commercial transactions "in furtherance of the bona fide trade or commerce" of the foreign entity are exempt from FARA. Trade or commerce, in turn, is defined to include the purchase or sale of "services . . . of any kind." This exemption applies to the "publicity agent" trigger, but it generally does not apply to political activities, such as those intended to influence the U.S. government or public on a matter of policy. Second, the regulatory commercial exemption, which *does* apply to political activities, exempts activities that are "directly in furtherance of the bona fide commercial . . . operations of the foreign corporation."

There seems very little doubt that Rossiya Segodnya's purchase of RM's airtime falls squarely within the scope of purchasing "services . . . of any kind," and Rossiya Segodnya's decision to purchase airtime and extend its broadcast reach seems, at least in part, to serve the company's commercial operations. To be sure, there are limitations on the commercial exemptions that may have been relevant in this case, including limitations when the commercial activities are directed by a foreign government or "directly promote" a foreign government's political interests. These issues, however, were entirely unexamined by the Court, and the Department was not required to show that Russian state interests or control were behind Rossiya Segodnya's commercial activities.

As a result, the Court's decision stands as a troubling precedent because it held, without qualification, that entering into a contract to sell services that fell within the FARA triggers required registration. The FARA triggers are exceedingly broad and, particularly when applied without the accompanying exemptions, could require registration for a very wide range of activities. The Court itself seems to have recognized these implications, noting that it "must apply the statutory language as written; it is not for the Court to rewrite the statute."

The "publicity agent" trigger at issue in the RM case covers anyone who engages in the "publication [of] matter of any kind," including books, periodicals, newspapers, broadcasts, movies, and more. Without the commercial exemptions, this trigger could incorrectly appear to require registration for a wide variety of commercial activities that are completely outside the scope of the statute. Everyday examples include a local movie theater contracting to show a foreign film, a publishing house contracting with a foreign author to publish the author's novel, and a Madison Avenue advertising agency creating an ad campaign for a foreign car manufacturer. Congress never intended for those activities to be captured by FARA, and that is made clear in the commercial exemptions and various other aspects of the legislative and regulatory history of the law. The Florida Court's FARA analysis unfortunately, and incorrectly, suggests otherwise.

As the Department of Justice pursues its new enforcement strategy for FARA, which Assistant Attorney General John Demers [announced](#) at a recent American Bar Association meeting, the specific scope and application of the statute will become even more important. It might be easy to suggest that the Department would not pursue registration against the movie theater, publishing house, or advertising agency described above. But there was also a time when the Department did not pursue registration of U.S. radio broadcasters doing business with foreign, state-owned media organizations. Businesses contemplating commercial transactions with foreign companies should not have to rely on prosecutorial discretion when determining whether a given transaction would make a company an agent of a foreign principal under FARA. RM, which did not receive support in the District Court from any interveners or amici, has publicly indicated that it does not have the resources to pursue an appeal. That's regrettable. There is little case law on FARA, and the RM decision is a flawed and problematic addition to the very limited precedents.