



M U L T I S T A T E

### [Senator Scarnati denies links between campaign funds and legislation](#)

Pennsylvania Senate Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati’s office denied a report written by [Spotlight PA](#) and The Caucus, which stated he and lobbyists were pushing for legislation that would vastly expand gambling in Pennsylvania.

In a statement, Mr. Scarnati denied the link between monetary contributions to his campaign and legislative support for additional gambling, calling the report “appalling.”

“I have not advocated for members of the Senate to support video gambling legislation,” the statement read. “In fact — in the past I actively worked against legislation that had been proposed for VGTs [video gaming terminals].”

The article, which appeared in Friday’s Post-Gazette, which is a journalism partner with Spotlight PA, said that Mr. Scarnati and lobbyists for deep-pocketed video gaming companies, many from out of state, were pushing for the legislation.

Spotlight PA and The Caucus defended their story in a tweet Friday.

“We @SpotlightPA and @CaucusPA stand firmly behind our reporting on this story. Our reporters remain undeterred in their commitment to fearless journalism that serves Pennsylvania citizens and holds their elected leaders accountable.”

The legislation in question would allow bars, restaurants, clubs and other establishments with liquor licenses to have VGTs. As current legislation stands, only truck stops are allowed to have VGTs in them.

In his statement Mr. Scarnati noted that Spotlight PA accepts donations from individuals and organizations as one method of funding the publication.

Mr. Scarnati closed his statement by saying that he would meet “any further false media statements” with legal action.

### [COVID-19 has changed Trenton lobbying in many ways, from remote conversations to clients’ priorities](#)

There was lobbying before March 9 ... it consisted of chasing down lawmakers outside Trenton’s State House to either promote or hurt the prospects of legislation lobbyists shepherded for clients.

Then there’s lobbying after March 9, the date Gov. Phil Murphy declared a public health emergency ... it’s a fight for attention in inboxes and voicemails. It’s less physically demanding, but don’t assume it’s any easier.

David Pascrell, co-chair of the government affairs department of law firm [Gibbons P.C.](#), said there’s a couple of things in the world of lobbying that have made the past few months a “whirlwind” for public affairs professionals.

“I could never have anticipated how many issues would come up from clients from that first emergency health declaration,” he said. “We’re busier than ever. And, with how quickly things change, the issues are also more urgent than ever.”

At the same time, public affairs professionals say that, as a general rule, it has been more difficult to connect with overworked state leaders purely remotely.

With State Street vacant, Sal Anderton, general counsel and legislative director at [Porzio Governmental Affairs LLC](#), said the profession has lost one of its most valuable assets — what he calls “shoe-leather lobbying.”

“So much of this profession was communications in hallways before hearings, bumping into legislators or staff,” he said. “Obviously, that’s not possible now. So, how we do our job has changed significantly.”

By now, lobbyists have gotten used to replacing those in-person communications with many more hours dialing numbers and typing emails.

But, at first, COVID-19’s overwhelming attack on the Garden State had some lobbyists thinking the easiest option might be not to engage too often or at all.

“Because you’re concerned about what people’s health was, what the health of their family was, whether they were safe and out of harm’s way,” Pascrell said. “In terms of any communication you had, that was another layer. We’re all humans, so we needed to treat each other with respect and be conscious of the fact that we were all dealing with this.”

Lobbyists have always had to walk a fine line with policymakers in New Jersey between inserting themselves and not being too intrusive. In the busiest of times, Trenton’s well-known public affairs experts had no problem treading those boundaries without stepping over them.

Pascrell said that’s especially relevant now, when lobbyists can’t afford to risk overwhelming their longtime contacts in the State House and having them shut down.

The governor’s chiefs of staff and other state leaders have been working 14- to 16-hour days, Pascrell said. Everyone in the industry is mindful of that.

But there’s also a new acceptability to having conversations outside the usual business hours, according to Dale Florio, public affairs professional at [Princeton Public Affairs Group](#).

“What you find yourself doing is talking to people around the clock,” he said. “You have to respect after-hours times. But, as long as you don’t abuse it, there’s a willingness to have evening conversations now.”

Where lobbyists are earning their pay is how solid their relationships with state leaders were going into the pandemic, Florio said. When opportunities to connect with someone spontaneously have been few to none, it helps to have a Rolodex.

Political fundraisers and other gatherings were the place to grow networks, Florio said, but those aren’t happening now. It might not be the best thing for less-experienced lobbyists — possibly making inroads in the profession a challenge for an entire generation of lobbyists, depending how long COVID-19 is a concern.

But, now more than ever, as the legislative calendar has been upended by public health recommendations, public affairs professionals have to count on hearing back in a timely fashion.

“We just don’t have the same lead time to committee meetings anymore,” Florio said, “which means there’s a shorter time frame to reach staff and legislators, to evaluate issues and to connect with clients to ask, ‘Do you like this or not?’”

One of the main tasks for public affairs professionals during the spread of COVID-19 has been to help businesses ascertain what restrictions they should expect to have to follow from the resulting state measures.

“Early on, there were a lot of individual clients that simply wanted to know where they stood in regards to the administration’s deliberations around nonessential businesses,” Florio said. “The administration did the best it could not to be so prescriptive about that.”

Now, there’s a lot of work being done on behalf of clients regarding the lifting of restrictions during the state’s multiphase reopening plan.

With government relief programs and the ability to reopen doors hanging in the balance, there have been reports as well as speculation that the pandemic situation was driving lobbying expenditures up across the country.

But, with the widespread uneasiness about the robustness of profits and the potential for a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, some in the local sector, including Florio, actually expect annual reports of lobbying expenditures in Trenton to be somewhat diminished from prior years. Florio said membership associations, often a key part of a public affairs firm’s clientele, are cutting costs.

On the other side of the coin, it is true that the clients of local public affairs firms are seeing more value in their services.

“So, we haven’t, knock on wood, had a client decide to change the relationship we’ve had because of this,” Pascrell said. “If anything, they’re utilizing our services at a higher level as there’s higher potential implications for business than ever.”

Some clients may have had the sole focus on COVID-19 in the State House usurp the attention they were trying to bring to particular legislative issues with the help of lobbyists.

But, Pascrell said he’s expecting legislation that was put on hold during a time of emergency might start moving again in the coming months.

“Honestly, it’s daunting to suggest that there’s a prospect of us soon pivoting to a time when these complicated and sometimes contentious bills that were put on hold are moving forward while at the same time we’re discussing COVID-19, economic issues and the budget,” he said.

The upshot, he added, is that public affairs professionals are going to stay busy for quite some time.

### **[DOJ files charges against disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff](#)**

The Justice Department is prosecuting the legendary lobbyist Jack Abramoff on felony conspiracy charges. Again.

More than 14 years after he pleaded guilty in the biggest Washington lobbying scandal in a generation, Abramoff has agreed to enter guilty pleas on charges of criminal conspiracy and failing to register as a lobbyist for his role in two separate schemes, [according to the Justice Department](#).

In the first, Abramoff allegedly failed to register as a lobbyist after he was hired by an FBI undercover agent posing as a businessperson. In the second, he and another man, Rowland Marcus Andrade, criminally misrepresented a cryptocurrency they claimed would use “biometric technologies” to verify its users’ identities, according to prosecutors.

The Securities and Exchange Commission has filed civil charges against Abramoff and Andrade in addition to the criminal charges.

Abramoff did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Andrade hired Abramoff in 2017 to “work on a public relations and marketing campaign” for the cryptocurrency, called AML Bitcoin, according to prosecutors. In the course of the work, Andrade and Abramoff “misrepresented the state of the development of the technology and the viability and timeline for the final release” of AML Bitcoin, they wrote in a filing. Abramoff later lied to an undercover agent who posed as a potential AML Bitcoin buyer, according to prosecutors.

Andrade and Abramoff also hired writers to publish op-eds falsely claiming that NBC had rejected a Super Bowl ad they had created for being “too political,” according to prosecutors. (The ad depicted North Korea’s Kim Jong Un berating underlings for failing to hack the cryptocurrency; BuzzFeed News [reported at the time](#) that the claim was untrue.)

While he was promoting AML Bitcoin, Abramoff was also pushing changes to federal marijuana laws for another client, according to prosecutors.

He “discussed topics with a member of Congress including the proposed modification or adoption of federal legislation regarding marijuana, adoption of laws that protected medical marijuana from federal law enforcement, and possible amendment to the federal tax code,” prosecutors wrote. But he never registered as a lobbyist for the work.

An undercover FBI agent separately later hired Abramoff to lobby. Abramoff lobbied a member of Congress but didn’t register to do so.

The prosecution drags Abramoff back into the headlines more than a decade after he got out of prison, where he served three and a half years after pleading guilty in 2006 to felony counts of conspiracy, fraud and tax evasion as part of a wide-ranging lobbying scandal. He plied government officials with gifts, including an all-expenses-paid trip to Scotland, expensive meals, Super Bowl tickets and campaign contributions, in exchange for help for his clients.

Abramoff [found work at a Baltimore kosher pizza restaurant](#) in 2010 after he got out of prison. He also became an advocate for reforms to limit the influence of money in politics to “stop folks like me,” [as he put it in 2015](#).

But he didn’t entirely leave the influence industry. In 2016, he was recruited by a Romanian consultant to help set up a meeting between President-elect Donald Trump and Denis Sassou-Nguesso, the president of the Republic of Congo. (The effort failed, but Abramoff did help set up a phone call between Sassou-Nguesso and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) that led to a meeting in Congo.)

Abramoff registered as a foreign agent months later after [POLITICO reported on his work](#) with Sassou-Nguesso. But he said that he wasn’t paid for his efforts, according to Justice Department filings.

Abramoff’s prosecution is a watershed moment in the enforcement of federal lobbying law: It appears to be the first time the Justice Department has filed criminal charges under the Lobbying Disclosure Act, which requires lobbyists representing domestic clients to register with Congress but is thought to be widely flouted.

While the Justice Department has carried out several high-profile prosecutions on charges of violating lobbying laws in recent years, those cases have involved violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which governs foreign lobbying. They included the cases against Paul Manafort, President Donald Trump’s former campaign chairman, who was sentenced last year to seven and a half years in prison, and Greg Craig, President Barack Obama’s former White House counsel, who was acquitted last year.

Robert Kelner, a Washington lawyer who advises clients on lobbying laws, said it was tough to say whether Abramoff's prosecution was an exceptional case or whether "this is the first shot in a new and unprecedented effort to actually enforce the largely unenforced Lobbying Disclosure Act."

"The fact that it involves probably the most infamous lobbyist of all time, Jack Abramoff, makes it that much more sensational," he added.

Unlike some other potential unregistered lobbyists, Abramoff can't argue he's not familiar with the law, said Josh Rosenstein, another lawyer who's an expert in lobbying law. Congress toughened lobbying disclosure laws in 2007 after Abramoff went to prison. It passed another law last year — titled the JACK Act, in a reference to Abramoff — forcing lobbyists convicted of bribery, embezzlement and other white-collar crimes to disclose them on lobbying paperwork. Abramoff would have had to do so if he'd registered again as a lobbyist.

Thomas Spulak, another lawyer who advises clients on lobbying laws, said the case appeared to signal a new aggressiveness on the part of prosecutors.

No one "should think simply because Jack Abramoff is in a class by himself, this is a one-time shot," Spulak wrote in an email to POLITICO. "There will be more."

### **LX Investigates: Congressmembers-Turned-Foreign Agents**

When voters in Southern California elected Buck McKeon to represent them in Congress — eleven times between 1992 and 2014 — they probably never thought he would one day use his political career, as well as their campaign cash, to launch a second career as a foreign agent.

Records show in late 2016, McKeon began working for Saudi Arabia, advocating for the kingdom's controversial priorities, even when they seemingly stood at-odds with his former constituents' priorities and longstanding U.S. policies.

Since then, McKeon has lobbied dozens of his former congressional colleagues on the Saudis' behalf, according to federal filings. He's tried to kill [legislation](#) that sought to withdraw U.S. troops from the Saudi-led war in Yemen; he's tried to get a [bill](#) passed to encourage sanctions on Saudi enemies in the Middle East; and he's worked to keep U.S. weapons flowing to the country, even as it finds itself [embroiled in scandal after scandal](#).

The hefty price tag for a former member of Congress didn't appear to be an issue for the Saudis — especially given their potential return on investment. McKeon reported pulling in \$50,000 a

month for his work at first, included a \$450,000 check from the kingdom just three days after what the CIA believes to be [the Saudi-sponsored murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#). [Recent federal filings](#) indicate McKeon got a 2019 raise, from \$600,000 per year to more than \$800,000.

While mercenarism by former members of Congress may raise red flags in the communities that once elected them, the practice rarely raises eyebrows in Washington. That's because it's become common to see former lawmakers jump at the chance to sign lucrative lobbying deals for foreign nations, even in an era of growing tensions overseas, and exploding debt at home.

A nine-month NBCLX investigation, which included the review of thousands of Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) filings, revealed more than 50 former members of the House and Senate who have worked for foreign interests in just the last five years.

That includes more than a dozen who leveraged their elected positions into jobs lobbying for controversial countries, such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, and China. Some of the former Congressmembers even advocated positions that seemed to contradict public stances they took while representing the American public.

Their lobbying work is felt across the country, from Wall Street to Main Street: these former politicians influence how easily foreign products can replace American goods on store shelves; they advocate where billions of U.S. tax dollars are sent abroad; and they influence important decisions that affect the deployment of American servicemembers, some of whom are put in harm's way.

“Foreign interests are trying to interfere in this country in a big way - in our elections, in our marketplace, (and) they're trying to turn us against each other - that is intelligence data that's known,” said former Congressman Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.), who now works as a consultant for [IssueOne](#), a watchdog group that seeks to reduce the role of money in politics. “Well, if they're trying to do that and we're not cleaning up the laws to protect ourselves of who's even representing them...shame on us.”

Wamp says it's all-too-easy for members of Congress to leave office and immediately go to work for foreign nations, thanks to outdated laws, poor enforcement, and a refusal by sitting lawmakers - from both parties - to reform a system that may one day put big paychecks in their pockets after they leave Congress.

He says the result is America's priorities don't always come first when it comes to how the legislative and executive branches spend U.S. tax dollars.

“This is a brave new world. But we don't have the current statutes in the law to keep people from taking advantage of us,” Wamp said.

And while foreign nations cannot send campaign donations to U.S. politicians, there are no rules prohibiting their lobbyists from doing so. McKeon and his family sent checks to at least 15 of the 27 members he lobbied on the Saudi's behalf.

This includes money from his old campaign account, which he never closed down, even though his campaigning days were over, and despite the fact that [the FEC prohibits](#) politicians from personally benefitting from leftover funds. The money his old constituents donated is now arguably helping advance Saudi priorities.

One of the lawmakers lobbied by McKeon, Congressman Joe Wilson (R-S.C.), agreed to sign on to a Saudi-backed bill, just five days after a [McKeon-brokered meeting](#) between Wilson and the Saudi ambassador. McKeon sent Wilson [\\$1,000 checks from his old campaign account](#) in the months before – as well as the months after – that meeting.

And after McKeon - and several other former lawmakers - lobbied officials on the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Saudis again saw return on their lobbying investment, as Congress [reportedly stripped out](#) several critical measures targeting the kingdom, just before the final version was passed. That included a prohibition on the U.S. selling the Saudis weapons, as well as penalties for the individuals associated with Khashoggi's murder.

Neither Wilson nor McKeon accepted NBCLX requests for an interview.

### *A Long Way From “America First”*

Concern about foreign influence in America's democracy is as old as the country itself: George Washington called it “[one of the most baneful foes of republican government](#),” Thomas Jefferson warned of getting “[entangled](#)” with foreign interests, and Alexander Hamilton predicted foreign powers’ “[desire...to gain an improper ascendant in our councils](#).”

But while the Constitution and federal laws prohibit foreign powers from spending money to influence American elections or give anything of value to elected officials, there's nothing stopping those same interests from spending hundreds of millions of dollars to influence American policies by hiring well-connected lobbyists.

In an effort to prevent Nazi propaganda from spreading in the United States, Congress passed the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) in 1938. There were several dozen prosecutions in

[the law's first three decades](#), but Congress narrowed FARA's definition of influence in 1966, allowing foreign nations to have a bigger impact in American politics.

The law still required lobbyists to disclose any work for a foreign country, but [a 2016 Department of Justice audit](#) revealed both poor compliance and lax enforcement. Watchdogs tell NBC10 the problem had been ignored for decades and there are likely far more than just 50 former lawmakers getting paid to influence where America sends troops, supplies, and tax dollars. They want a [full FARA overhaul](#).

“The reason that foreign interests spend so much lobbying in the United States is because it works,” said Brendan Fischer, Director of Federal Reform for the Campaign Legal Center, another nonprofit focused on reducing money's impact on politics. “The tens or hundreds of millions of dollars that foreign interests are spending on lobbying (affects) potentially billions of dollars in U.S. taxpayer funds.

“We should expect that U.S. policy is being shaped in the interest of U.S. voters and U.S. citizens, not based on which foreign interest is spending the most on lobbying.”

[The Center for Responsive Politics](#) tracked \$800 million flooding Washington firms - from just 10 countries - between 2017 and 2019. Those countries were South Korea (\$124M), Japan (\$111M), Israel (\$95M), Qatar (\$82M), Marshall Islands (\$70M), Saudi Arabia (\$67M), Liberia (\$63M), China (\$63M), UAE (\$62M), and Ireland (\$60M). Just outside the top-10 was Russia (\$44M).

“Transparency about the identity of foreign interests bankrolling influence operations is fundamental for Americans to understand the credibility of propaganda targeting them,” said Center for Responsive Politics researcher Anna Massoglia.

Politicians with a large Washington rolodex can earn multiples of their \$174,000 Congressional salary by trading in their elected positions for private lobbying jobs. But that's a bridge too ethically far for some politicians.

“How do they sleep well at night?,” former Sen. Alan Simpson (R-Wy.) asked rhetorically of former members of Congress who lobby for controversial foreign interests. “If you're getting paid, I guess that can trigger a new kind of belief.”

Simpson also called some of his former colleagues “whores” without providing specific names, and said the temptation of millions of dollars - even from questionable special interests - is too

much of a lure for some to pass up. In those cases, he wants to see better disclosure laws and better enforcement of FARA to protect Americans from the threat of foreign influence.

The Trump administration has given FARA a boost, both through [compliance efforts](#) and through increased enforcement, particularly after the Mueller probe [shined a spotlight on secretive foreign influence](#).

Among those ensnared in federal investigations for alleged FARA violations were former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, whose undisclosed work on behalf of Ukraine interests led to a conviction, and former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, whose undisclosed lobbying on behalf of Turkey throughout 2016 was not ultimately prosecuted once he pled guilty to other charges.

But while the White House and Department of Justice push foreign agents to comply with FARA's transparency mandates, they've done little to pressure Congress to change a culture that allows lawmakers to sometimes prioritize foreign interests over America's.

Among the more than 50 former lawmakers-turned-foreign agents identified by NBCLX were well-known politicians, such as Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), Sen. Al D'Amato (R-NY), and House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.).

Most of the former officeholders did not respond to requests for comment, but some, like former Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) provided short statements like, "we don't have anything to add beyond what was included in our FARA registration." Former Rep. Albert Wynn (D-Md.) wouldn't comment except, "most of our clients are NATO allies and others are pro-western democracies."

Ten of the foreign agents agreed to discuss their work, all of whom indicated they were selective about which interests they lobbied for and they were proud of the issues they advocated. Some, such as former representatives Jim Moran (D-Va.), Henry Bonilla (R-Texas), and Porter Goss (R-Fla.) held up their FARA disclosures as proof the system provides sufficient transparency and their work benefited U.S. diplomacy.

Others acknowledged FARA relies too much on former members' honesty and ethical boundaries.

"FARA's been a very good thing (for transparency), but could the laws demand more? It's certainly worth looking into," said former Rep. Mike Andrews (D-Texas), who said he never lobbied on behalf of a foreign interest, but registered as a foreign agent of Saudi Arabia out of an abundance of caution when providing advice to the kingdom. "There are instances where you

really question, ‘why is (a former member of Congress) doing this? Is that in America’s interests?’”

Former Congressmembers Jim Slattery (D-Kan.), Toby Moffet (D-Conn.), Rep. Don Bonker (D-Wash.) and Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.) each expressed similar sentiments, detailing their advocacy on behalf of human rights issues and suggesting FARA could be improved with more transparency and enforcement. Rep. Jim McCrery (R-La.) and Rep. Charles Bass (R-N.H.) were the other former members who agreed to interviews.

But those who were willing to talk proved to be the exceptions. Many of the more than 40 former lawmakers who declined interviews also filed some of the least-transparent FARA disclosures, often failing to detail specific officials they met with or specific issues they discussed. Since reporting guidelines are vague, level of transparency in FARA filings is left up to the individual and his/her firm.

### *Hunter Biden Wasn’t Alone*

Hunter Biden, son of then-Vice President Joe Biden, was [reportedly paid \\$50,000 per month](#) for his [work as a board member](#) for a Ukrainian gas company from 2014 to 2019. But he wasn’t the only American with White House connections collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for his services.

In 2018, federal filings show a [group of Ukrainian steel companies](#) began paying \$70,000 a month to the firm owned by former Congressman Bob Livingston (R-La.), who has made [tens of millions of dollars](#) lobbying since resigning his seat over an extramarital affair scandal in 1998.

What did those companies get for their \$70,000 per month?

Livingston’s disclosures aren’t particularly detailed, but they reveal the former Congressman scored meetings to discuss his clients with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Vice President Mike Pence, and President Trump’s then-chief of staff, John Kelly.

[Impeachment testimony would later indicate](#) Livingston repeatedly advocated the removal of U.S. Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, who was pushing for Ukraine to crack down on political and corporate corruption.

However, Livingston did not disclose those calls on his FARA filings, and [he would later tell USATODAY](#) the calls had nothing to do with his Ukrainian clients paying him nearly a million dollars a year. He did not respond to NBCLX's request for comment.

### *Chinese Influence*

When video surveillance giant Hikvision found itself [facing sanctions in 2018](#) for alleged [human rights violations](#) against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party-controlled company turned to a proven strategy for staving off disaster: it hired former members of Congress.

Among Hikvision's hires were former Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) and former Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.), according to 2018 FARA filings. Former Rep. Rick Boucher (D-Va.) also disclosed lobbying on Hikvision's behalf in 2018, but because he hasn't filled out FARA disclosures since 2015, it's unclear when his Hikvision work began.

For Vitter, [his pledge to defend Hikvision](#) appeared to be a departure from the stances he took on religious freedoms while in the Senate, when he co-sponsored a 2015 measure that would have required any U.S. trade negotiations to consider whether a country persecuted religious minorities.

Nevertheless, the lawmakers-turned-lobbyists worked their contacts in Washington for over a year, as Hikvision ultimately avoided America's steepest sanctions, which would have included a ban on transactions with any U.S. agency and the freezing of its U.S. assets. Instead, Hikvision was hit with lesser sanctions, which likely saved the state-controlled company hundreds of millions of dollars - significantly more than the roughly \$3 million the former lawmakers' lobbying firms reported receiving from the company.

Vitter, who has also lobbied on behalf of [controversial Russian clients](#), did not respond to NBCLX's multiple requests for comment. However, in a 2019 statement to the Washington Post, he defended his work with Hikvision "because it's based on very concrete, meaningful changes to business practices and corporate governance in support of human rights."

Neither Boucher nor Rehberg responded to NBCLX's request for comment, and a representative from Hikvision declined to answer questions as well.

However, Hikvision is far from alone in hiring former U.S. lawmakers to defend Chinese-controlled entities, as former senators [Dole](#) and [Joe Lieberman](#) (I-Conn.) have both

disclosed relationships with Chinese companies through lobbying disclosures, as well as [a handful of other well-known former politicians](#), some of whom never filed FARA disclosures.

### *A Turkish Twist*

No country has built an arsenal of former Congressmembers like Turkey, an American ally that has created international waves in recent years as it's grown closer to Russia. The nation - and groups linked to it - have hired at least 12 former American lawmakers to influence policy in Congress and the White House, according to FARA filings since 2015.

One of the Americans helping Turkey, which has received hundreds of millions of U.S. tax dollars in recent years, was former Congressman Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), whose firm is owned by one of President Trump's top fundraisers, Brian Ballard.

According to [FARA filings](#), Wexler and Ballard secured meetings with members of Congress, the State Department, and White House on Turkey's behalf between 2017 and 2019. They advocated against penalties for Turkey's Halkbank, which successfully avoided U.S. sanctions for several years, even though the state-owned bank was allegedly laundering billions of dollars to Iran.

Former National Security Advisor John Bolton wrote in his new memoir that Trump attempted to stop the criminal investigation into Halkbank prior to its eventual [federal indictment](#) by the Southern District of New York.

Turkey scored other Washington victories during this period, including control of Syria after an unexpected and controversial U.S. withdrawal of troops there in 2019, and by fending off American sanction threats after the country ignored U.S. warnings not to buy military rockets from Russia.

Wexler didn't respond to multiple requests for comment. However, another former Congressman, Rep. McCrery, who lobbied for Turkey from 2015 to 2018, told NBCLX he was never asked to advocate priorities that he saw as at-odds with America's.

"Direct conflicts of interests to the United States never arose during that time," McCrery said.

### *What It Will Take to Fix FARA*

Watchdogs say out-of-date statutes and a history of limited enforcement prompt many individuals to bypass FARA filings altogether, even as the Trump administration slowly increases its enforcement of the law.

“Despite the gravity of the information divulged under FARA, it is not uncommon for records to omit crucial details or have other inconsistencies,” said the Center for Responsive Politics’ Massoglia. “Sometimes FARA documents are incomplete or incorrect, and sometimes foreign agents don’t register at all.”

Some individuals, such as Hikvision lobbyist Boucher, file congressional lobbying disclosures in lieu of FARA disclosures, making it even more difficult to determine what kind of influence foreign interests are having on American policies and tax dollars. This loophole in the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) was recommended for review by the DOJ’s inspector general, and several watchdog groups have advocated for closing the loophole altogether.

But fixes will require members of Congress to make moves that could impact their post-congressional financial futures. And one of the few things that both Democrats and Republicans in Washington often agree on, is preserving the lucrative system that benefits them all.

“This is bad. It erodes the trust that people deserve to have,” Wamp said. “The government only works where we can have confidence in our elected leaders.

“We have to redo (FARA) and update it for the modern era where we have these new threats. If (foreign nations) are going to play in our election space, then we’ve got to make sure that they don’t play with our representatives.”

### *The List:*

Below are the former members of Congress who have disclosed foreign relationships in FARA filings over the past five years. This list does not include former members who are lobbying for foreign interests, but did not file FARA disclosures.

- Tim Hutchinson, R-AR
- Ronald V. Dellums, D-CA (deceased)
- Ed Royce, R-CA
- Dan Lungren, R-CA
- Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-CA
- Anthony John "Toby" Moffett, D-CT
- Bruce A. Morrison, D-CT

- James L. Bacchus, D-FL
- Porter Goss, R-FL
- Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-FL
- Connie Mack IV, R-FL
- Jeff Miller, R-FL
- Robert Wexler, D-FL
- Jack Kingston, R-GA
- Mark Kirk, R-IL
- Jerry Weller, R-IL
- Bob Dole, R-KS
- Jim Slattery, D-KS
- Charles Boustany Jr., R-LA
- John Breaux, D-LA
- Robert L. Livingston, R-LA
- Jim McCrery, R-LA
- David Vitter, R-LA
- Bill Delahunt, D-MA
- Albert R. Wynn, D-MD
- Peter Hoekstra, R-MI
- Bart Stupak, D-MI
- Gerry Sikorski, D-MN
- Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-MO
- Richard A. Gephardt, D-MO
- Kenny Hulshof, R-MO
- Trent Lott, R-MS
- Clifford Ronald "Ronnie" Shows, D-MS
- Denny Rehberg, R-MT
- Earl Pomeroy, D-ND
- Charles Bass, R-NH
- Alfonse M. D'Amato, R-NY
- Vito Fossella, R-NY
- John McHugh, R-NY
- John Sweeney, R-NY
- Edolphus Towns, D-NY
- James T. Walsh, R-NY
- Bob McEwen, R-OH
- Ron Klink, D-PA
- John Tanner, D-TN
- Mike Andrews, D-TX
- Henry Bonilla, R-TX
- Greg Laughlin, R-TX
- Jim Moran, D-VA
- Rick Boucher, D-VA

- Randy Forbes, R-VA
- Don Bonker, D-WA

### [Feltes proposes campaign finance reform pledge for gubernatorial hopefuls](#)

Pledges are prominent in the Democratic gubernatorial race.

Senate Majority Leader Dan Feltes has taken the traditional pledge to veto broad based taxes. Executive Councilor Andru Volinsky has refused that one, while pledging to reduce property taxes for most Granite Staters.

Feltes on Thursday is releasing a proposed pledge related to campaign finance reform – and he’s asking that Volinsky and Gov. Chris Sununu, and other candidates, sign on. He’s calling it the [“Granite State People’s Pledge.”](#)

Feltes is proposing:

-- “For every dollar spent in outside Dark Money from organizations that refuse to disclose their donors and support one candidate’s campaign or attack an opponent’s campaign, the benefiting campaign agrees to donate 50 cents to a charity of the opponents’ choosing.”

-- “For every dollar from a corporation, corporate PAC, or LLC that is contributed to a candidate’s campaign, that candidate’s campaign shall pay 50 cents to a charity of an opposing candidate’s choice.”

-- “For every dollar of self-funding a candidate loans or contributes to their own campaign above the legal limit (for individual donors), that candidate shall pay 50 cents of the contribution to a charity of an opposing candidate’s choice.” There is no legal limit on the amount of money a candidate can contribute to, or loan to, his or her campaign.

-- All candidates release 10 years of tax returns, as Feltes did last October.

Releasing his pledge, Feltes said: “Whether it was in the courtrooms or at the State House, I saw over and over again that the laws weren’t written with working people in mind. Too many were written behind closed doors to benefit lobbyists and campaign contributors.

“Some think this is just about Capitol Hill in D.C., but it's not. The State House needs to get cleaned up, too. It needs transparency and campaign finance reform in order to put the power in

the hands of the people, where it belongs. All of that starts right now with all 2020 gubernatorial candidates signing this pledge and agreeing to be a part of the solution. It's one thing to say you support transparency and campaign finance reform, it's another to actually walk-the-walk."

Update: Commenting on Feltes' proposal after this report initially appeared, Volinsky campaign manager Irene Lin said: "From day one, the Volinsky campaign knew we were not going to take any corporate PAC money or violate the LLC loophole.

"Andru even ripped up a corporate PAC check he received. Our values have been crystal clear as opposed to the Feltes campaign that admitted from day one they would not 'unilaterally disarm' and chose to take corporate PAC money and violated the LLC loophole with their own campaign treasurer. But Dan Feltes can live up to his own pledge by donating now the money he received from Liberty Utilities."

Feltes campaign spokesperson Emma Sands responded: "We're proud to be endorsed by End Citizen's United, the leading organization fighting back against the corrupting influence of big money. Senator Feltes has led the charge on campaign finance reform in the Senate, on this campaign, and will continue as governor."