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Six Benchmarks for Lobbying Reform

During the coming months, the House and Senate will consider reforms to respond to the lobbying scandals in Washington that deeply concern the American people.

A *CNN/USA Today/Gallup* poll (January 10, 2006), for example, found that "corruption ranked among the concerns most often cited by those polled, with 43 percent telling pollsters it would be an 'extremely important' issue in 2006," just 2 percent below the 45 percent response for the war in Iraq and terrorism.

Our organizations are releasing today six benchmark lobbying reforms that should be used to judge the proposals being considered by Congress in the next few months. The organizations include the Campaign Legal Center, Common Cause, Democracy 21, the League of Women Voters, Public Campaign, Public Citizen and U.S. PIRG. We will work to enact these important reforms.

While we are focusing primarily on lobbying reforms today, we want to make clear that campaign contributions are at the heart of the lobbying and corruption scandals now engulfing Congress. In addition to the immediate battle for lobbying reforms, it is essential in the end to achieve fundamental campaign finance reforms, most importantly public financing of elections, if we are to restore the integrity and health of our democracy.

Our organizations will work to fix the presidential public financing system in time for the 2008 presidential election and to extend public financing to congressional races. We will also work for other essential campaign finance reforms, including replacing the Federal Election Commission with a real campaign finance enforcement agency, closing the loophole for 527 groups and abolishing leadership PACs. We also recognize that structural reforms of Congress must be enacted to address the lobbying scandals, including reforms to address the misuse of "earmarks," and that other procedural reforms are necessary to ensure a fair and democratic legislative process.

In terms of lobbying reform, we are proposing six essential benchmark reforms. They include proposals that have overwhelming public support. A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll (January 10, 2006), for example, reported that *90 percent* of the American people believe that it should be illegal for lobbyists to give members of Congress gifts, trips or other things of value. *Two-thirds* of the American people, according to the poll, believe it should be illegal for lobbyists to make contributions to Members and other federal candidates. Our organizations support the following benchmark reforms.

1. Break the nexus between lobbyists, money and lawmakers.

Cap contributions from lobbyists and lobbying firm PACs to federal candidates at \$200 per election and to national parties and leadership PACs at \$500 per election cycle.

Prohibit lobbyists and lobbying firms from soliciting, arranging or delivering contributions and from serving as officials on candidate campaign committees and leadership PACs.

Prohibit lobbyists, lobbying firms and lobbying organizations from paying or arranging payments for events "honoring" members of Congress and political parties, such as parties at national conventions, and from contributing or arranging contributions to entities established or controlled by members of Congress, such as foundations.

2. Prevent private interests from financing trips and from subsidizing travel for members of Congress and staff, and executive branch officials and federal judges.

Corporations and others should be prohibited from making privately owned planes available for Members to travel at the cost of a first class air ticket rather than the cost of a chartered plane.

3. Ban gifts to members of Congress and staff.

The gift ban should close the existing loophole in the gift rules that allow lobbyists and others to pay for parties held to “honor” or “recognize” specific Members, such as the lavish parties held at the national party conventions.

4. Oversee and enforce ethics rules and lobbying laws through an independent congressional Office of Public Integrity and increase penalties for violations.

Establish an independent Office of Public Integrity in Congress and provide sufficient resources for the Office to effectively carry out its responsibilities.

The Office should monitor and oversee financial disclosure and lobbying reports; advise Members, staff and lobbyists on compliance with the rules; conduct investigations of non-frivolous allegations of ethics violations, including complaints filed by Members and outside individuals and groups; present cases involving potential ethics violations to the congressional Ethics Committees for consideration and action; and refer potential lobbying law violations to the Justice Department for civil enforcement.

5. Slow the revolving door.

Prohibit members of Congress and senior executive branch officials from making lobbying contacts or conducting lobbying activities for compensation in either branch for two years after leaving their positions.

Prohibit senior congressional staff from making lobbying contacts for compensation with their former offices or committees for two years after leaving their positions.

6. Place sunshine on lobbying activities and financial disclosure reports.

Require lobbying reports and Members' financial disclosure reports to be filed in an electronic format and made fully searchable on the Internet; lobbying reports to be filed on a quarterly basis; lobbyists and lobbying firms to disclose grassroots lobbying activities; lobbyists to file a list of the Members' offices and congressional committees they lobbied during the quarter; and reports to be filed disclosing the financial backers of stealth lobbying coalitions.