



Beyond the Halls of Congress

Mapping Out the Forces
Behind America's Lobbying Industry

TRENDS 360

Welcome to the third edition of Trends 360, the bimonthly newsletter from Trends Research & Advisory. Each issue unpacks critical global developments shaping the international landscape, from shifting alliances and great power rivalries to emerging policy disruptions. This month, we turn our attention to the age-old profession of Lobbying.

While lobbying has existed for as long as government itself, it has increasingly become associated with corruption, undue influence, and self-serving interests, often orchestrated to benefit wealthy corporations, special interest groups, and foreign governments or entities. Lobby-driven advocacy shapes numerous policy decisions, offering entities a range of rewards, from tax breaks and subsidies to bailouts and regulatory rollbacks—all designed to protect their interests and boost their bottom line.

In the case of foreign governments, lobbying can also serve to advance economic interests, such as securing favorable trade agreements or arms deals, as well as managing public relations efforts to build or repair their image in the U.S. public sphere.

The Role of Lobbying in Today's Policy Landscape

In its simplest terms, lobbying refers to the act of petitioning the government to influence the policymaking process. It remains a vital, though frequently debated, component of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. It is also a major spending sector—in 2024 alone, \$4.5 billion was spent on federal lobbying to influence policymaking and top decision-makers ¹—serving as a bridge between corporations and special interest groups and the U.S. government.

While lobbying is legally protected under U.S. law, it remains regulated to ensure transparency and accountability for the good of the public. Under the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) of 1995, any individual or entity, whether nonprofit or for-profit, that is paid to influence federal legislation or policy must register as a lobbyist. Registration is required with both the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives. Lobbyists must also file quarterly reports disclosing their lobbying activities and expenditures. ²

Nonprofit organizations that engage in lobbying must follow additional rules, including being subjected to limitations on how much they can spend on lobbying or risk losing tax-exempt status. In contrast, for-profit corporations and labor unions are not subject to such spending limits. ³

¹ "Top 10 Federal Lobbying Firms," Bloomberg Government, April 2025 ,17, <https://about.bgov.com/insights/public-affairs-strategies/what-are-the-top-10-lobbying-firms-in-the-u-s/>.

² U.S. Congress. (n.d.). Lobbying Disclosure Act guidance: Registration (LD-1) requirements. <https://lda.congress.gov/ld/help/default.htm?url=Documents%2FLD1Requirements.htm>

³ Alliance for Justice. (n.d.). Understanding the Lobbying Disclosure Act. https://afj.org/wp-content/uploads/06/2018/Understanding_the_Lobbying_Disclosure_Act.pdf



Importantly, the LDA applies only to federal lobbying, while state and local lobbying are regulated by the individual jurisdictions of each state. Every state has its own laws, definitions, thresholds, and reporting requirements governing lobbying activities at the state and municipal levels. Meanwhile, foreign lobbying is governed by a separate legal framework known as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which requires individuals or entities acting on behalf of foreign principals to register with the U.S. Department of Justice.⁴

Agents of foreign principals – i.e. individuals or organizations acting at the direction, control, or request of a foreign government, must disclose detailed information about their lobbying activities, including objectives, expenditures, and disbursements. Originally enacted in 1938 to promote transparency and limit foreign influence over U.S. policymaking, FARA plays a key role in informing the public and government officials about foreign efforts to shape domestic policy.⁵

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice. (n.d.). Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). National Security Division. <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara>

⁵ Congressional Research Service. (2020, March 3). Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA): Background and issues for Congress (IF11439). <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11439>

Lobbying is a largely opaque industry, often portrayed in popular media as unscrupulous actors roaming the halls of Congress with briefcases of cash—a depiction that reinforces public perceptions of corruption. While Democrats and Republicans rarely see eye to eye, %84 of voters from both parties believe that lobbyists and special interest groups have too much influence in the political process. Meanwhile, %70 of Americans feel their elected officials don't pay enough attention to the views and needs of the people they represent, according to recent polling.⁶

Amid ongoing debates about election integrity since Donald Trump's rise, the rhetoric of 'draining the swamp' has fueled public fears that interest groups, often portrayed as part of the entrenched political establishment, ultimately undermine the democratic process. This perception suggests that lobbyists wield disproportionate influence, overshadowing the issues and priorities elected officials were voted into office to address.

Lobbyists, on the other hand, often view their work as widely misunderstood. Many, though certainly not all, see their role as a way to communicate their clients' needs to the U.S. government. Lobbyists help individuals, organizations, or groups communicate with and influence the government, especially when those clients lack the knowledge, resources, or access to do so themselves.⁷ While some represent large corporations seeking deregulation that can have serious consequences for sectors like the environment or the pharmaceutical industry, others advocate on behalf of nonprofits, labor unions, or civil rights groups, including women's rights organizations.

The reality is, there is no single ethical lens through which to view the lobbying industry. It represents a broad spectrum of interests, some altruistic, some self-serving, and reflects a nuanced landscape that cannot be reduced to binary notions of virtue or vice.

⁶ "7 facts about Americans' views of money in politics," Pew Research Center, October 2023 ,23, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/7/23/10/2023-facts-about-americans-views-of-money-in-politics/>.

⁷ Michael Gessel, "I'm a Washington lobbyist. Don't hate me," Los Angeles Times, January 2017 ,16, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-gessel-lobbyists-20170116-story.html>.

Is Lobbying Legal?

With roots traced back to the early days of the republic, the idea of lobbying the government was enshrined in the U.S. Constitution under the First Amendment as the right to petition the government, a core democratic principle, protected alongside freedom of speech:

First Amendment to the United States Constitution⁸

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

In its original form, lobbying was viewed as a legitimate tool to help inform government decisions and ensure that public needs were represented. The concept itself was not controversial; it was intended as a safeguard for democracy. However, what began as a mechanism for public advocacy has since evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry, one often associated with undue influence, backdoor deals, and financial incentives for politicians, fueling persistent public distrust.⁹

Prior to the passage of the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act (FRLA) of 1946, no comprehensive laws directly targeted domestic lobbying as a whole. Earlier laws focused on specific industries or foreign influence but did not broadly regulate lobbying activities aimed at Congress.¹⁰

⁸ National Archives and Records Administration, The Bill of Rights: A transcription. In America's founding documents, U.S. National Archives, April 2025, 28, Retrieved July 2025, 22, from <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

⁹ Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access, OECD, 2021, Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c6d8eff8-en>.

¹⁰ Belle Zeller, The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act. American Political Science Review, 42, no. 271–239 : (1948) 2, <https://doi.org/1949730/10.2307>.

Previous measures, such as the Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935, a 1936 congressional act regulating shipping interests, and the FARA of 1938, addressed specific sectors or foreign influence but did not comprehensively regulate domestic lobbying.¹¹

The growing influence of lobbyists on legislation and policymaking in Washington ultimately prompted the passage of the FRLA. It wasn't until after World War II that Congress introduced the first comprehensive system requiring lobbyists to register and disclose their activities. FARA, passed earlier in 1938, specifically focused on foreign agents, mandating registration and financial disclosure for those representing foreign interests.¹²

FRLA required any individual or entity intending to influence “the passage or defeat of any legislation by the Congress of the United States” to register with the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Senate. Registrants were also required to submit reports disclosing detailed information about the amounts of money spent on such efforts.¹³

The challenge, however, lay in the wording of the law. If an individual or organization did not consider lobbying their “principal purpose,” one could argue that their activities fell outside the scope of the law.¹⁴ As a result, compliance became largely a matter of interpretation, creating significant loopholes in enforcement.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Craig Holman, “Origins, evolution and structure of the Lobbying Disclosure Act,” Public Citizen (n.d.), <https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/ldaorigins.pdf>.

¹³ Jacob R. Straus, “The Lobbying Disclosure Act at 20: Analysis and Issues for Congress,” (CRS Report No. R44292), Congressional Research Service, December 2015, 1, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44292>.

¹⁴ Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, “Lobbying Act,” (n.d.), Retrieved from https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/1563052/0067.pdf



Due to the weak and ineffective language and enforcement mechanisms of the FRLA, the 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) was passed amid growing bipartisan concerns over corruption and back-door deals in Washington. While the FRLA wording only included lobbying members of Congress, the LDA expanded its coverage to include the legislative and executive branches of the Federal Government, but does not include state or local lobbying.

The LDA requires lobbyists to register and disclose their activities, including the issues they lobby on, the individuals involved, and associated expenditures. LDA clearly defines a "lobbyist" as someone who makes more than one lobbying contact and spends at least %20 of their time on lobbying activities for a client over a three-month period. Furthermore, registrants must file quarterly reports detailing their lobbying efforts and semi-annual reports on political contributions and certain gifts.¹⁵

¹⁵ "What is the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA)?" Holland & Knight, November 2017 ,16, <https://www.hklaw.com/en/insights/publications/11/2017/what-is-the-lobbying-disclosure-act-lda>

Types of Lobbies in the U.S. Domestic



As of 2024, more than 13,000 registered lobbyists operate in the United States.¹⁶ Domestic lobbying spans a wide spectrum, from large corporations and the gun lobby to the defense industry to Big Pharma, Big Tech, environmental groups, civil rights organizations, and countless others. For virtually every piece of legislation, there is a lobby either supporting or opposing it, ensuring the interests of those whom they represent are not left behind. In principle, lobbyists are meant to serve as intermediaries between the public and the government, helping to inform policymakers of the needs, concerns, and demands of the people they are elected to represent.

Lobbying can take on many forms to support a particular cause, including campaign contributions through Political Action Committees (PACs) or independent expenditure-only committees, commonly known as Super PACs. It can also involve media and public influence campaigns to shape or repair public image, as well as expert consultations. These consultations often target think tanks, policy institutes, legislators, and government regulators by providing data, insights, and policy recommendations on domestic or foreign policy issues.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Number of lobbyists in the U.S. 2023–2000 [Chart]," Statista, 2024, Retrieved June 2025 ,30, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/257340/number-of-lobbyists-in-the-us/>

¹⁷ "Lobbying in the 21st century: Transparency, integrity and access," OECD, May 2021 ,20, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c6d8eff8-en>.

Lobbyists are often hired for their intricate understanding of regulatory processes, along with their personal connections in Congress, which is why most lobbyists are former members of Congress themselves. For clarification purposes, a lobbying firm provides lobbying services, while a lobbying client pays for those services to advance their own policy interests. From the 115th session of Congress (seated from 2017 to 2019), %48 of former members are now employed by lobbying firms, while a lobbying client employs %11.¹⁸ In 2022, at least 672 former government officials, military officers, and members of Congress held roles as lobbyists, board members, or executives for the top 20 U.S. defense companies.¹⁹

According to a report prepared by Senator Elizabeth Warren’s office, the top two U.S. defense contractors, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, posted profits of \$5.726 billion and \$13.6 billion, respectively, in fiscal year 2022. To sustain this level of profitability, defense contractors routinely hire former Department of Defense (DoD) officials and other government personnel, leveraging their insider knowledge and connections to secure contracts from their former colleagues.²⁰

As of May 2025, the top three lobbying organizations within the US include:

Organization	Key Policy Priorities	Total Spent
U.S. Chamber of Commerce	Business regulation, tax policy, trade, labor, environmental regulations	\$19,780,000
Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America (PhRMA)	Drug pricing, intellectual property protection, FDA regulations, healthcare policy	\$12,995,000
National Association of Realtors (NAR)	Real estate tax benefits, mortgage interest deductions, property rights, housing finance regulations	\$11,282,603

Source: OpenSecrets. Top Lobbying Spenders

¹⁸ “Former members of Congress – 115th Congress. Center for Responsive Politics,” OpenSecrets (n.d.), Retrieved July ,1 2025, from <https://www.opensecrets.org/revolving-door/former-members-of-congress?cong=115>.

¹⁹ Taylor Giorno, “Over 500 former government officials are now lobbying for defense contractors,” Truthout, May 2023 ,6, <https://truthout.org/articles/over-500-former-government-officials-are-now-lobbying-for-defense-contractors/>.

²⁰ Elizabeth Warren, “Pentagon Alchemy: How Defense Officials Pass Through the Revolving Door and Peddle Brass for Gold,” U.S. Senate, April 2023, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DoD%20Revolving%20Door%20Report.pdf>.

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Likewise, the rise of rapidly advancing technology has fueled Big Tech's growing influence, and with it, a surge in lobbying expenditures in Washington. In 2024 alone, Meta surpassed its rivals, spending \$24.43 million on lobbying efforts, followed by Amazon at \$19.8 million and Alphabet Inc., the parent company of Google and YouTube, in third place at \$12.63 million.²¹ Serving as its 'foot soldiers,' Meta employs 66 lobbyists, roughly one for every eight members of Congress.²² This level of investment reflects a concentrated effort to influence Capitol Hill, often with the aim of weakening or blocking responsible online regulations and safeguards.

In January 2025, during President Trump's second inauguration, the front row was occupied by none other than Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos, seats traditionally reserved for the president's family, former presidents, politicians, and dignitaries.²³ This time, however, the three wealthiest men on earth were seated front and center, which some commentators viewed as symbolic of the growing nexus between wealth and political access in Washington.

During the 2024 presidential campaign, Elon Musk contributed a combined \$277 million to support Trump and other Republican candidates seeking re-election. Musk, along with Mark Zuckerberg and others, made frequent trips to Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, often referred to by Trump as the "Southern White House," in pursuit of regulatory rollbacks, favorable treatment, and lucrative government contracts.²⁴ Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos, owner of The Washington Post, reportedly went so far as to block the paper's 2024 endorsement of then-presidential candidate Kamala Harris.²⁵

²¹ "Leading internet companies in the U.S. by lobbying spending 2024," Statista, (n.d.), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1035987/us-leading-internet-lobbying-spenders/>.

²² Amelia Minkin and Michael Beckel, "Big Tech ramps up lobbying as industry seeks to thwart legislation to protect kids online," Issue One, October 2024 ,22, <https://issueone.org/articles/big-tech-ramps-up-lobbying-as-industry-seeks-to-thwart-legislation-to-protect-kids-online/>.

²³ Ali Swenson, "Trump, a populist president, is flanked by tech billionaires at his inauguration," AP News, January 2025 ,21, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inauguration-tech-billionaires-zuckerberg-musk-wealth-0896bfc3f50d941d62cebc3074267ecd>.

²⁴ "Tech billionaires take center stage at Trump inauguration," France 24, January 2025 ,20, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250120-tech-billionaires-take-center-stage-at-trump-inauguration>.

²⁵ Ibid.

Foreign Lobbies



The Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) was designed to monitor and promote transparency surrounding foreign influence on U.S. policymaking, whether related to foreign policy, trade, tourism, or other economic interests. FARA requires individuals or organizations in the United States working on behalf of foreign governments, companies, or groups to register and publicly disclose their activities if those activities are intended to influence U.S. policy or public opinion. The law is administered and enforced by the FARA Unit within the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section (CES) of the National Security Division (NSD) at the U.S. Department of Justice.²⁶

Since 2016, more than \$5.7 billion has been spent on foreign lobbying in the United States.²⁷ Nations lobby for a range of objectives, from securing arms sales and military aid to gaining U.S. favor in regional conflicts or engaging in reputation laundering, especially during crises when they seek to evade scrutiny or avoid sanctions. For example, between 2022 and 2023, Ukraine reported the second-highest number of political activities, 13,601, primarily focused on securing military aid.²⁸ Similarly, firms representing Azerbaijan lobby aggressively against U.S. support for Armenia, often portraying Armenia as aligned with U.S. adversaries like Russia and Iran, a narrative crafted to appeal to Washington policymakers.²⁹

²⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, "Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)," (n.d.), Retrieved July 2025 ,1, from <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara>.

²⁷ "Foreign Lobby Watch," OpenSecrets (n.d.), Retrieved July 2025 ,1, from <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara>.

²⁸ Ben Freeman and Nick Cleveland-Stout, "Foreign Lobbying in the U.S.," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, July 2024 ,3, <https://quincyinst.org/research/foreign-lobbying-in-the-u-s/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

Top 5 Spending Countries, 2024-2016

Total Spending

1. China	\$456,923,221
2. Japan	\$410,750,957
3. Liberia	\$353,129,848
4. South Korea	\$321,986,020
5. Saudi Arabia	\$309,761,188

Source: OpenSecrets. Foreign Lobby Watch

While China has ranked as the top foreign spender on lobbying and influence efforts in the U.S. since 2016, the largest recipients of this spending were the state-owned China Global Television Network (CGTN), an English-language international news channel based in Beijing with operations in the U.S., and China Daily, an English-language newspaper. Together, these two outlets reportedly accounted for nearly half of all Chinese foreign influence spending.³⁰ According to a report by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, this spending is widely viewed as an effort to disseminate Chinese state propaganda.³¹

³⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's growing attempts to influence U.S. politics," Council on Foreign Relations, October 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/chinas-growing-attempts-influence-us-politics>.

³¹ Ben Freeman and Nick Cleveland-Stout, "Foreign Lobbying in the U.S.," op. cit.

Interestingly, Liberia, despite being one of the poorest nations globally, spends a substantial amount of money each year on lobbying, with expenditures exceeding \$235 million in the U.S. in 2023 alone.³² While the figure may seem staggering, it likely reflects not only traditional lobbying but also a wide range of activities disclosed under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), including public relations, promotional services, and efforts tied to Liberia's shipping and corporate registry sector. In fact, Liberia's heavy reliance on the international shipping industry, managed by the Liberian International Ship & Corporate Registry (LISCR), may significantly contribute to this total, given that such commercial representation falls within FARA reporting requirements. Notably, Liberia also maintains more foreign lobbyists per capita than any other African nation.³³

Ahead of Liberia's 2023 general and presidential elections, the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) intensified lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C., aiming to strengthen ties with the U.S. government and counteract perceptions of corruption and governance challenges. This included hiring lobbyists to facilitate high-level meetings with U.S. policymakers, including Republican Senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Ted Cruz of Texas, to improve the administration's image and secure increased U.S. support.³⁴

Nonetheless, in 2025, during his tenure as head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Elon Musk cancelled a \$17 million United States Agency for International Development (USAID) project for Liberia known as Local Empowerment for Accountability and Decentralization (LEAD), aimed at strengthening local governance, empowering communities, and improving Liberia's ability to generate and manage its own revenue.³⁵

³² "Countries with the most lobbying activity spending in the U.S. in 2023," Statista, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1420523/countries-most-lobby-activity-spending-us/>.

³³ "Are Liberian government officials laundering money under the pretext of foreign lobbying?," Smart News Liberia, October 2022 ,12, <https://smartnewsliberia.com/are-liberian-government-officials-laundering-money-under-the-pretext-of-foreign-lobbying/>.

³⁴ Obediah Johnson, "Liberia: Ruling Coalition for Democratic Change-led government, collaborating political parties intensify negotiation in Washington D.C. ahead of 2023 general and presidential elections," FrontPage Africa, September 2021 ,20, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/analysis/liberia-ruling-coalition-for-democratic-change-led-government-collaborating-political-parties-intensify-negotiation-in-washington-d-c-ahead-of-2023-general-and-presidential-elections/>.

³⁵ "U.S. Gov't Cancels US\$17M Support to Liberia,"Liberian Observer, February 2025 ,12,

Contemporary Lobbying and Its Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy



Since the passage of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), lobbyists in Washington have received billions of dollars in funding from foreign governments and corporations, with the intention of shaping U.S. policy and facilitating effective interactions with governmental decision-makers. Nearly every country maintains interests in the United States, and to effectively interact with American decision-makers, these foreign actors hire lobbyists to advocate on their behalf, as a direct link exists between lobbying and policy outcomes, with foreign entities spending an estimated \$5.7 billion since 2016.³⁶

³⁶ "Foreign Lobby Watch," op. cit.

Case 1: The Israeli Lobby



Observers note that few lobbying networks in the United States wield as much sustained and bipartisan influence over foreign policy as the constellation of pro-Israel organizations, commonly referred to as the “pro-Israel lobby.” The pro-Israel lobby, which is well-funded and politically powerful, remains one of the most influential players in American foreign policy that seeks to maintain the country’s military and fiscal support to the Jewish state. The network comprises prominent entities such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Christians United for Israel, J Street, and numerous affiliated PACs and advocacy groups that assist in securing consistent U.S. political, military, and diplomatic support for Israel under all administrations. According to data from OpenSecrets, the total amount from top pro-Israel contributors between 2023 and 2024 was about \$60 million.³⁷

During the same period, AIPAC alone contributed \$3 million to candidates of both parties, dwarfing the second-highest pro-Israel PAC, Joint Action Committee for Political Affairs, which contributed \$418,027 to Democrats.³⁸ However, in contrast to foreign agents, who are required to file semi-annual reports with the Department of Justice under FARA detailing their expenditures, pro-Israel lobbying groups are not subject to the same oversight, as they do not fall within FARA’s jurisdiction. According to a leaked strategy memo from 2018, registration under FARA might impose reputational risk and require meeting onerous transparency standards, which some observers believe could damage the public perception of U.S.-based organizations with financial ties to Israel.³⁹ While the pro-Israel lobbies are unified in achieving the interests of Israel, they are not entirely unified on the approaches to achieving these policy decisions.

³⁷ “Pro-Israel Summary,” OpenSecrets, February 2025 ,6,
<https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/industry-detail/Q2024/05>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Leaked Documents Reveal Israel’s Strategy to Avoid US Foreign Lobbying Law – Report,” The Jerusalem Post, August 2024 ,18,
<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-815198>.

AIPAC and Influence

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, was established in the 1950s to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship by advocating for supportive legislation in Congress. Since its founding, AIPAC has engaged with both Democratic and Republican politicians to ensure broad, uninterrupted American support for Israel through activities that include lobbying for foreign aid, arms sales, and defense cooperation for Israel. AIPAC continues to maintain unparalleled political influence through its effective lobbying tactics, substantial financial backing of politicians, and extensive grassroots mobilization, engaging with over 5 million pro-Israel grassroots members across the United States.

Activities carried out by AIPAC include bipartisan congressional trips to Israel that are arranged through the American Israel Education Foundation, a charitable organization founded by AIPAC. These visits to Israel are only one part of a multipronged strategy for promoting Israel's interests, as millions are spent every year ferrying dozens upon dozens of members of Congress to Israel to play an essential role in lining up support on Capitol Hill.⁴⁰ Between 2012 and 2023, AIPAC spent over \$10 million recruiting members and staff for trips to Israel, demonstrating the importance that AIPAC places on its travel program.⁴¹

Groups like AIPAC lobby for generous U.S. aid to Israel and U.S. alignment with Israel in international fora, successfully advocating for continued billions in U.S. military aid to Israel with no new conditions, for expanding sanctions on Iran, and for laws countering the pro-Palestine Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.⁴²

While AIPAC has continued to invest heavily in reinforcing bipartisan U.S. support for Israel, some observers suggest that the lobby is facing growing scrutiny and political pushback, especially following the "12-Day War" in June 2025 between Iran and Israel. The coordinated Israeli military operations sparked a wave of public discontent with Washington's involvement in another Middle Eastern conflict, and the framing of Iran as a principal threat and the emphasis on Israel's right to self-defense featured prominently in policy discussions, echoing long-standing narratives advanced by pro-Israel advocacy groups.⁴³

⁴⁰ Aidan Hughes, Cait Kelley, and Daryl Perry, "Members of Congress Have Taken Hundreds of AIPAC-funded Trips to Israel in the Past Decade," POLITICO, October 2024 ,30, <https://www.politico.com/news/30/10/2024/israel-aipac-funded-congress-travel-00185167>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Yehuda Lukacs, "The Tide Turns: Why American Support for Israel Is Eroding," The Times of Israel, June 2025 ,29, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-tide-turns-why-american-support-for-israel-is-eroding/>.

Case 2: The Arab Lobby



Although often considered less cohesive than the pro-Israel lobby, the Arab lobby is composed mainly of state-led lobbying efforts from Gulf countries. While grassroots Arab-American organizations like the Arab American Institute (AAI) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) advocate for domestic interests, most measurable influences come from the governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar through top-tier lobbying firms to help shape U.S. foreign perspectives on regional security, energy cooperation, defense procurement, and knowledge exchange.

According to OpenSecrets, the Gulf trio remained the top foreign investors in Washington between 2016 and 2024, with a core focus of their lobbying tactics being to advance regional policy priorities and strengthen engagement with the United States.⁴⁴ Observers have noted that the sustained yet understated diplomatic engagement by the Gulf trio has contributed to shaping U.S. foreign policy in recent years, particularly during U.S. President Donald Trump's three-day tour of the three Gulf countries.

⁴⁴ "Foreign Lobby Watch," op. cit.

Soft Power: Educational and Cultural Dialogue

In addition to formal lobbying, the use of soft power has become a central pillar of the Gulf countries' foreign policy strategies. Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have used cultural diplomacy and education as mediums to build good relations with other countries around the world. In contrast to the use of hard power, such as military force or coercive means, to achieve their objectives, the three nations employed soft power to lobby through attractiveness. One form of soft power involves providing funding to educational institutions in the United States, with the goal of establishing lasting academic collaborations and enhancing cultural influence.

Foreign Funding Bestowed to U.S. Universities in 2024	Total Spending
Qatar	\$342,848,176.00
China	\$176,665,093.00
Saudi Arabia	\$175,295,395.50
Hong Kong	\$81,732,786.00
Oman	\$13,150,714.41
Bahrain	\$4,081,358.00
Lebanon	\$1,000,000.00
Iraq	\$230,000.00
Azerbaijan	\$56,500.00
Russia	\$19,093.00
Grand Total	\$795,079,115.91

Source: Americans for Public Trust

40 Charles Kenny and Justin Sandefur, "New Estimates of the USAID Cuts," Center for Global Development, March 2025 ,20, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/new-estimates-usaid-cuts>.

41 Margaret Besheer, "UN Chief Urges US to Reverse 'Severe' Aid Cuts to Humanitarian Programs," Voice of America, February 2025 ,28, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-chief-urges-us-to-reverse-severe-aid-cuts-to-humanitarian-programs/7993125.html>.

42 Emily Davies et al., "Trump Administration Moves to Formally Collapse USAID," The Washington Post, March 2025 ,28, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/28/03/2025/trump-usaid-abolish-earthquake-congress/>.

43 Ibid.

This approach has allowed the Gulf countries to enhance their security while also attracting investment, trade, skilled labor, and tourism, thereby supporting sustained economic growth. The region is positioned to attract talented individuals who seek a high quality of life, and especially those who are after pristine educational institutes opening their campuses in these Gulf powerhouses. Gulf funding for Western universities is not new, especially in American universities that have expanded to the region, such as New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) and Georgetown University in Qatar. Through education, the Gulf trio is poised to transition from an energy-focused to a knowledge-based economy that relies on intellectual strengths and trust-building with countries worldwide.

Qatar exemplifies this trend, reportedly spending \$342 million in 2024 at American colleges and universities, with a considerable share directed toward Ivy League institutions such as Harvard and Cornell.⁴⁵ In January 2024, the Qatari Ministry of Education and Higher Education announced its intention to increase Qatari student enrollment at American higher education institutions in both Qatar and the United States.⁴⁶ Similarly, Saudi Arabia ranks third, contributing \$176 million, including funding for the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU) at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The mission of the Center, which prioritizes the study of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations, aims to serve as a bridge, fostering mutual understanding between the Muslim world and the West.

⁴⁵ "Foreign Money Flowing Into U.S. Colleges and Universities," Americans for Public Trust, May 2025 ,21, <https://americansforpublictrust.org/reports/apt-report-foreign-money-flowing-into-u-s-colleges-and-universities/>.

⁴⁶ U.S. Embassy in Qatar, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue," March 2024 ,5, <https://qa.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-qatar-strategic-dialogue-2/>.

What's Next? The Future of Lobbying and Foreign Influence in the U.S.



In March 2025, the Lobbying Disclosure Improvement Act and the Disclosing Foreign Influence in Lobbying Act were reintroduced with bipartisan support in the 119th Congress. The Lobbying Disclosure Improvement Act aims to close the so-called LDA exemption loophole by requiring lobbyists to indicate whether they are using the exemption that allows them to register under the LDA instead of the stricter FARA.⁴⁷ Currently, foreign agents can use this exemption if their activities are not directly on behalf of a foreign government or political party and do not primarily benefit them.

The Disclosing Foreign Influence in Lobbying Act would strengthen transparency by requiring lobbyists to disclose whether any foreign government or political party is involved in directing, planning, or supervising their activities. These address growing concerns about foreign governments using third parties to indirectly influence U.S. policies. This would add to the current rule that requires disclosure of organizations contributing more than \$5,000 per quarter toward lobbying efforts.⁴⁸

47 Capeloto, T. (2025, March 10). "Congress' continued focus on the administration and enforcement of FARA in the 119th Congress," Wiley, March 2025 .10.

48 <https://www.wiley.law/alert-Congress-Continued-Focus-on-the-Administration-and-Enforcement-of-FARA-in-the-119th-Congress>.
Ibid.

These legislative efforts reflect a broader push to strengthen the enforcement and oversight of FARA at a time of rising geopolitical competition. As major global powers and an increasing number of assertive middle powers seek to influence U.S. policymaking to advance their own agendas, concerns about foreign influence have become more urgent. At the same time, there is growing pressure, particularly from Democratic lawmakers, to reform campaign finance laws to improve transparency around political donations and reveal who is attempting to exert influence over elected officials.

In July of last year, Democratic lawmakers introduced legislation that would ban U.S. companies that are “appreciably” owned by foreign entities from donating or spending money in American elections. While federal law prohibits foreign nationals from directly contributing to federal, state, or local elections, it does not apply to U.S.-registered companies that are partially owned by foreign investors, including major multinational corporations. These corporate entities, along with their treasuries, remain free to spend unlimited sums in elections.⁴⁹

Bringing greater clarity to the role of wealthy nations, large corporations, and special interest groups in petitioning the government is critical to ensuring voters understand who is shaping the policies that affect them. The influence of foreign lobbying is perhaps most visible in the case of the well-funded and politically powerful pro-Israel lobby, which spans multiple organizations and channels and spent over \$60 million between 2023 and 2024 alone to sustain bipartisan support for Israel. However, influence is not exerted solely through campaign contributions. Soft power tools, such as educational partnerships and cultural institutions, also play a growing role in shaping perceptions and building long-term relationships. Recognizing both financial and non-financial modes of foreign engagement is essential to understanding the full spectrum of how countries, including U.S. allies in the Arab world, pursue their interests in Washington.

⁴⁹ Representative Jamie Raskin, “The Hill: Democratic lawmakers take aim at foreign money in elections,” July 2024, 11, <https://raskin.house.gov/7/2024/the-hill>.

Looking ahead, the nature of lobbying will continue to evolve in tandem with rapid technological advancements. While traditionally understood as a formal or informal exchange between lobbyists and policymakers, influence now extends far beyond closed-door meetings. The rise of AI-generated content, disinformation campaigns, and manipulated imagery means that lobbying efforts, whether by allies or adversaries, can now shape public opinion through digital channels rather than direct persuasion. In this new environment, every image, every post, and every “fact” encountered online warrants scrutiny from the public. As lobbying becomes more diffuse and decentralized, increased transparency is essential, not only for policy clarity but also for safeguarding public trust in an era where perception can be engineered as easily as policy.





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