

**Common Cause • Democracy 21
League of Women Voters • Public Citizen • U.S. PIRG**

March 18, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Our groups are non-profit organizations that work on behalf of comprehensive government integrity laws that effectively protect the interests of the American people.

We are writing to express our strong support for the Ethics Executive Order you issued at the beginning of your Administration and for the reasons underlying the Order.

As you have pointed out in the past, there is a compelling need to change the way Washington works.

The Washington culture of lobbyists, special interests and campaign contributions combine to exercise undue influence over government decisions, at the great expense of the citizens of our country. One clear example of where these forces intersect, much in the recent news, is in the area of congressional earmarks, and this intersection makes a powerful case for fundamental reform of the nation's campaign finance laws.

Your groundbreaking Ethics Executive Order, with its unprecedented revolving door and "reverse" revolving door requirements, directly and appropriately challenges Washington's influence culture. It is a major first step in the battle to fix Washington.

The revolving door provisions in the Executive Order, which cover lobbying by high level officials who leave the Obama Administration, are the broadest in scope, length and coverage ever adopted by an Administration. They are necessary to prevent former government officials from improperly trading on their government service for personal gain.

The "reverse" revolving door provisions for lobbyists seeking to join the Administration represent the first time that such provisions have ever been adopted. They are necessary to prevent former lobbyists from inappropriately favoring former employers and clients and to prevent the appearance of such favoritism.

We support the revolving door and "reverse" revolving door provisions for lobbyists in the Executive Order and do not believe that different classes of lobbyists should be established for purposes of applying these important government safeguards.

We recognize there will be a learning curve for all involved as your Administration gains experience in the use of these provisions for the first time. The Executive Order provides for the Office of Government Ethics (OGE) to prepare an annual public report on how the Order is working. We would expect the Executive Order to be reviewed following the first OGE report to determine whether there are ways that may make sense to strengthen or adjust its provisions.

Some have raised questions about the waiver provision in the Executive Order. The waiver provision is not unusual for these kinds of rules and provides valuable flexibility in the implementation of the new rules.

The keys to the waiver provision are that there is a legitimate rationale for each waiver, that there is transparency for each waiver and that waivers are limited in their use. For example, in some cases, an agreement on areas of recusal may serve as a legitimate basis for granting a waiver. In other cases, broad public interest needs may justify a waiver.

Others have claimed that the Ethics Executive Order has led to delays in making appointments to the new Administration. We have not seen evidence of this happening and we believe that to the extent that delays may be occurring, this is likely to result from the vetting process or other factors rather than from the Executive Order.

We very much appreciate and applaud the initial steps you have taken, starting with the Ethics Executive Order, to challenge the ingrained influence-money culture in Washington.

While some concerns have been raised inside Washington by lobbyists and others about the breadth and scope of the Ethics Executive Order, in our view the American people do not share these concerns and strongly support, as we do, your efforts to change the way Washington works.

We look forward to working with you on other important government integrity matters, most importantly on changing the way campaigns are financed, the overriding issue in changing the way Washington works.

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