

Reform Groups Strongly Praise President Obama's Government Integrity Reform Measures during First Hundred Days

Statement Issued by Common Cause, Democracy 21,
League of Women Voters, Public Citizen and U.S. PIRG

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Our organizations strongly praise President Obama for the unprecedented steps he has taken during the first hundred days of his Administration to strengthen ethics, lobbying and transparency rules for the Executive Branch.

Equally important, we believe, is the larger effort by President Obama embodied in these initial actions to challenge the way business is done in Washington and the special interest, lobbying culture that influences government decisions at the expense of the American people.

We recognize that this is a long term battle and that the toughest fight to change the way Washington works still lies ahead – the need to address the role of influence money in Washington by repairing the existing presidential public financing system and creating a new congressional public financing system.

Nevertheless, we believe the President has demonstrated in his first hundred days through words and deeds that he is serious about changing the rules of the game in Washington and increasing the voice of citizens in the governing process.

Our organizations believe President Obama deserves great credit and recognition for the groundbreaking government integrity reforms he has put in place during the first hundred days of his Administration. We look forward to working with President Obama on future government integrity reform efforts and, most importantly, on the essential battle to fundamentally reform the nation's campaign finance laws.

The Ethics Executive Order issued by the President at the outset of his Administration contains precedent-setting revolving door provisions. These provisions are designed to prevent potential conflicts of interest for incoming government officials involving their former employers or clients, and to prevent improper trading on government service for personal gain by outgoing government officials.

The Executive Order contains the first-ever “reverse revolving door” provisions for incoming presidential appointees, which are designed to prevent new appointees from importing the interests of their former employers and clients when they enter government and to help assure citizens that the public interest will come first. The Executive Order requires all appointees to recuse themselves from matters that significantly affect the interests of anyone who was a former employer or client of the incoming official within the two years prior to joining the Administration.

In addition, former lobbyists who actively lobbied a specific agency or department during the previous two years are generally precluded from receiving a presidential appointment to that agency or department for the following two years, unless a waiver from the restriction is determined to be justified.

The revolving door provisions also prohibit departed presidential appointees from coming back to lobby any senior executive branch official in the Administration for the full length of the Obama presidency. These are the toughest revolving door provisions ever established.

The Executive Order further prohibits all presidential appointees from accepting any gifts from lobbyists or lobbying organizations, other than token gifts of *de minimis* value, and instructs the Office of Government Ethics to develop a similar gift ban for all executive branch employees.

Under the Executive Order, all presidential appointees are required to sign a binding “ethics pledge” to abide by the revolving door restrictions, recusal arrangements and gift ban, and the Office of Government Ethics is required to report on the effectiveness of the Executive Order and how it might be modified to enhance its purpose.

The Obama Administration also has taken unprecedented transparency steps during its first 100 days.

In a pilot project adopted for the economic stimulus package, the Administration for the first time requires registered lobbyists working to influence Executive Branch decisions on specific grants and contracts to submit their lobbying requests in writing. This information is then posted by the Administration on the Internet and made available to the public. Each agency is also required to post on their web sites lobbying contacts by

registered lobbyists with the agency on all other general issues related to the stimulus package.

The pilot project for the stimulus package opens the door to establishing a government-wide policy for public disclosure of all lobbying contacts by registered lobbyists with Executive Branch officials. This would greatly expand existing lobbying disclosure requirements.

The Administration also has made an important change regarding the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by ordering agencies and departments to adopt a presumption of disclosure for information requested under FOIA. This should make it far easier for citizens and the media to obtain information under FOIA.

The Administration has undertaken numerous other efforts to provide the public with access to Executive Branch information, including making financial disclosure reports by White House officials available to the public by immediate electronic access for the first time, providing information on how stimulus package funds are being spent on the Internet and placing various White House events and documents on the White House website.

In a reversal of an Executive Order adopted by President Bush, the Administration also restored the practice of having only a sitting President, and not past Presidents, able to restrict citizen and media access to presidential records by claiming executive privilege over these records.

President Obama also ordered a group of federal agencies, including the Office of Management and Budget, to develop recommendations for a new Open Government Directive to be issued by the President.

All of these steps add up to unprecedented action taken by President Obama on groundbreaking government integrity measures that begin to rebalance the interests in Washington of the American people with the influence in Washington of special interests.