

Bribing the Bride

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The Problem: Spousal Lobbying and Conflicts of Interest in Congress

The early 2000s witnessed a growing crisis of public confidence in congressional ethics, culminating in calls for comprehensive reform of lobbying practices.¹ Among the practices drawing scrutiny was the employment of congressional spouses as registered lobbyists, which created both real and perceived conflicts of interest that undermined public trust in democratic institutions. While spousal lobbying was entirely legal prior to 2007, it raised profound ethical questions about the appearance of impropriety, insider access, and the potential for undue influence on legislative decision-making.² The convergence of high-profile scandals, most notably the Jack Abramoff affair, and mounting evidence of ethical lapses created the political momentum necessary for Congress to address this problem through statutory reform.

In the years leading up to the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 (“HLOGA”), numerous members of Congress were married to registered lobbyists, creating a web of potential conflicts that attracted increasing scrutiny from journalists and government watchdog organizations.³ These arrangements were particularly troubling when the lobbyist spouse represented clients with direct business before the member’s committee or sought legislative action that the member could influence. Several cases from the mid-2000s illustrate the scope and nature of the problem.

¹Bell, Peter. 2025. “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025.” Pew Research Center. December 4, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025>.

²“S.1 – 110th Congress (2007–2008): Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007.” Congress.gov. 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/senate-bill/1>. [CORRECTED: Original footnote was malformed — missing opening quotation mark and contained a stray closing parenthesis. Reformatted as a standard Chicago citation.]

³Straus, Jacob. 2015. “The Lobbying Disclosure Act at 20: Analysis and Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service (CRS Report R44292). Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44292>.

The case of Representative Roy Blunt (R-MO) and his wife, Abigail Perlman, illustrates the conflicts of interest that arise when a sitting legislator is married to a registered lobbyist.⁴ As House Majority Whip, Blunt attempted to insert a provision benefiting Philip Morris into the Homeland Security Act of 2002. Such a maneuver would attract little comment under ordinary circumstances, but it took on a troubling dimension once it became known that his wife was simultaneously serving as a registered lobbyist for Philip Morris leaving constituents to question whether the action was a legislative coincidence or a private accommodation of the household's financial interests.⁵

The conflict of interest inherent in spousal lobbying is both bipartisan and bicameral. In 2006, Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND) came under scrutiny after delivering a floor speech on the federal estate tax that made no mention of the life insurance industry, a notable omission for a member of the Senate Finance Committee whose spouse was a registered lobbyist for that very sector.⁶ Such conflicts were not confined to male legislators. Senator Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) publicly urged Senate restraint regarding a proposal to transfer management of several U.S. ports to a company controlled by the United Arab Emirates, while her husband, former Senator Bob Dole, had simultaneously been retained to represent Dubai Ports World, a UAE-owned entity.⁷ That contradiction raises an obvious question: whether the UAE retained a former Kansas

⁴Salas-Rodriguez, Israel. 2021. "Who Is Missouri Senator Roy Blunt's Wife?" The US Sun. March 8, 2021. <https://www.the-sun.com/news/2473480/meet-missouri-senator-roy-blunts-wife-abigail-perlman/>.

⁵Gill, Sam. 2006. "Wash. Post Falsely Claimed Blunt's Wife Does Not Lobby Congress." Media Matters for America. January 12, 2006. <https://www.mediamatters.org/washington-post/wash-post-falsely-claimed-blunts-wife-does-not-lobby-congress>.

⁶Heldman, Caroline. 2014. "Elizabeth Dole." Encyclopaedia Britannica. February 27, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Dole#ref377454>. See also: "Senate's Ban on Lobbying Spouses Is Limited." NBC News/Associated Press. February 9, 2007. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna17064540>.

senator for his lobbying expertise alone, or whether his marriage to a sitting member of the Senate Armed Services Committee made him a particularly attractive advocate.

While spousal lobbying had long existed in Washington, it took a scandal of extraordinary proportions to generate the political will for reform. The criminal investigation of lobbyist Jack Abramoff exposed a pattern of corruption and the defrauding of Native American tribes of \$85 million in fees, bribing congressional officials, and exploiting the revolving door between Capitol Hill and K Street so egregious as to demand legislative action.⁸ The political fallout proved decisive in the 2006 midterm elections, in which Democrats campaigned successfully on a platform of ethics reform and accountability.⁹ Abramoff's guilty plea in January 2006 to charges of conspiracy, fraud, and tax evasion demonstrated that existing ethics rules were insufficient to prevent corruption and that the relationship between lobbyists and legislators required fundamental restructuring. His prosecution paved the way for the enactment of HLOGA.¹⁰

Scholars and reformers identified four distinct ethical problems associated with congressional spousal lobbying requiring legislative intervention.¹¹ First, even absent actual corruption, the appearance of impropriety when members' spouses lobby Congress undermines public confidence in the legislative process.¹² Second, direct conflicts of interest arise when a

⁸Thurber, James. "Issues of Ethics and Lobbying in American Democracy." Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, January 24, 2026. [CORRECTED: Original used a single opening quotation mark (‘) and rendered the lecture title as “America Democracy” — corrected to “American Democracy.”]

⁹Welna, David. 2006. "The Abramoff Case's Partisan Fallout." NPR. January 16, 2006. <https://www.npr.org/2006/01/16/5159722/the-abramoff-cases-partisan-fallout>.

¹⁰"Former Lobbyist Jack Abramoff Pleads Guilty to Charges Involving Corruption, Fraud Conspiracy, and Tax Evasion." U.S. Department of Justice. January 3, 2006. https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2006/January/06_crm_002.html.

¹¹Appleton, Susan, and Robyn Rimmer. 2026. "Power Couples: Lawmakers, Lobbyists, and the State of Their Unions." WashU Scholarly Repository. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol24/iss1/9/.

¹²"Employment Considerations for Spouses of Members and Staff." House Committee on Ethics. November 14, 2024. <https://ethics.house.gov/manual/employment-considerations-for-spouses-of-members-and-staff/>.

spousal lobbyist's clients have matters before the member's committee or require the member's vote on specific legislation¹³ placing the member in the impossible position of weighing the duty to represent constituents impartially against the natural inclination to support a spouse's professional success and protect shared household finances. Third, spousal lobbyists enjoy insider access advantages that distort the lobbying marketplace; congressional staff who know that a lobbyist is married to their employer may grant meetings and share information more readily than they would to other advocates.¹⁴ Finally, spousal lobbying creates a mechanism for circumventing the ethics rules designed to prevent financial conflicts of interest, because lobbying income earned by a spouse flows into the household economy without triggering the same disclosure and scrutiny that would attach to direct payments to the member.¹⁵

The Goals: Objectives of Section 302

Section 302 of HLOGA established a specific prohibition on lobbying contacts between a member's staff and the member's spouse when that spouse is a registered lobbyist.¹⁶ The provision amends House Rule XXV to require each Member "to prohibit all of his or her staff from making any lobbying contact with the Member's spouse if the spouse is a registered lobbyist or is employed or retained by a registered lobbyist to influence legislation." The provision's objectives are fourfold: eliminate direct conflicts of interest by preventing

¹³Greenberg, Madeleine. 2025. "Stopping the Revolving Door: Preventing Conflicts of Interest from Former Lobbyists." Campaign Legal Center. 2025. <https://campaignlegal.org/update/stopping-revolving-door-preventing-conflicts-interest-former-lobbyists>.

¹⁴Attkisson, Sharyl. 2010. "Family Ties Bind Federal Lawmakers to Lobbyists." CBS News. June 25, 2010. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/family-ties-bind-federal-lawmakers-to-lobbyists/>.

¹⁵"Will You Be Mine? The Ethics Rules for Spousal Interests." U.S. Department of the Interior. February 13, 2024. <https://www.doi.gov/ethics/will-you-be-mine-ethics-rules-spousal-interests>.

¹⁶Straus, Jacob. 2025. "Lobbying Registration and Disclosure: Before and After the Enactment of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007." Congressional Research Service (CRS Report R40245). Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R40245>.

congressional staff from being lobbied by their employer's spouse; enhance transparency and accountability by making the relationship between lawmakers and lobbying interests more visible to the public; restore public trust by addressing voter concerns about congressional ethics in the wake of the Abramoff scandal; and prevent inappropriate influence by blocking spousal lobbyists from exploiting family relationships to gain a competitive advantage in the lobbying marketplace.¹⁷ Although Democrats led on ethics reform following their 2006 electoral victory, the concern was genuinely bipartisan.¹⁸ S.1 was introduced to the 110th Congress by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV).

The Reform: Section 302 Provisions and Mechanics

In the 110th Congress, S.1 was enacted as Public Law No. 110-81 on September 14, 2007. The operative text of Section 302 provides: “(Sec. 302) Amends Rule XXV (Limitations on Outside Earned Income and Acceptance of Gifts) to require a Member of the House to prohibit all of his or her staff from making any lobbying contact with the Member's spouse if the spouse is a registered lobbyist or is employed or retained by a registered lobbyist to influence legislation.”¹⁹ The prohibition is thus targeted and narrow: it bars staff-to-spouse lobbying contact but does not restrict the member directly, does not prohibit the spouse from lobbying other members, and does not extend beyond the House to the Senate, the executive branch, or

¹⁷Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007, Pub. L. No. 110-81, § 302, 121 Stat. 735 (2007). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-bill/2316/text>. [NOTE: The original cited the bill's sponsor (Rep. Conyers) rather than the enacted statute itself. For a legal-ethics audience, citation to the public law is the appropriate primary source.]

¹⁸Kaplan, Alex. 2006. “Ethics Reform Tops Agenda but Dems Still Ironing out Details.” E&E News/Politico. December 6, 2006. <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2006/12/06/ethics-reform-tops-agenda-but-dems-still-ironing-out-details-231544>. [CORRECTED: Original listed author as “Kuplan” and year as 2026. Corrected to “Kaplan” (per URL slug) and year 2006 (per URL path /2006/12/06/).]

state and local government. The provision is enforced through the House Ethics Committee's pre-existing self-regulatory framework, with no independent enforcement mechanism created by the Act.²⁰

The Impact: Evaluation of Section 302 Effectiveness

Measured against its stated objectives, Section 302 produced modest behavioral changes while generating significant unintended consequences.²¹ On the positive side, several spouses voluntarily deregistered as lobbyists following HLOGA's enactment. Notably, Abigail Blunt ceased lobbying the House entirely in 2006, even before the Act took effect.²² The provision did create a formal barrier between congressional staff and spousal lobbyists, reducing the most direct channel of potential impropriety.

The provision's limitations, however, are substantial. Section 302's prohibition applies only to lobbying contacts initiated with a member's own staff; it does not restrict the member's own communications with a lobbyist spouse, nor does it prevent a spousal lobbyist from approaching the staff of other members.²³ The Act also applies exclusively to the House and Senate; it does not reach executive branch officials or state and local government.²⁴ While the public may identify spousal relationships through existing financial disclosure forms,

²⁰Holman, Craig. "Current Perspectives for Ethics and Lobbying Reform: Problems and Solutions." Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, February 7, 2026.

²²Gill, Sam. 2006. "Wash. Post Falsely Claimed Blunt's Wife Does Not Lobby Congress." Media Matters for America. January 12, 2006. <https://www.mediamatters.org/washington-post/wash-post-falsely-claimed-blunts-wife-does-not-lobby-congress>.

²³Holman, Craig. "Current Perspectives for Ethics and Lobbying Reform: Problems and Solutions." Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, February 7, 2026.

²⁴Rosenstein, Josh. "Federal Lobbying Law: High-Level Summary." Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, January 24, 2026.

enforcement data for Section 302 violations is sparse, the House Ethics Committee lacks resources for proactive monitoring, and the provision's operation depends substantially on voluntary member compliance.²⁵ Congressional approval ratings remained low throughout the period from 2008 to 2025, suggesting no appreciable restoration of public trust attributable to HLOGA.²⁶ The provision is therefore best characterized as a symbolic reform rather than a substantive one.

The most consequential unintended effect of Section 302 was the acceleration of “shadow lobbying.” HLOGA’s restrictions created incentives for deregistration rather than cessation of lobbying activity.²⁷ Former officials and lobbyist spouses continued to engage in influence work in an unregistered capacity by exploiting the 20% threshold in the Lobbying Disclosure Act, the statutory rule that limits the definition of “lobbyist” to persons who spend at least 20% of their time on lobbying activities for a given client.²⁸ By reducing their formally tracked lobbying time below that threshold, spousal lobbyists could continue influencing legislation now before other members rather than their own spouse’s staff while operating outside the disclosure regime entirely. The limited enforcement record confirms the structural weakness: few violations have been documented, penalties have been rare, and the Act’s self-enforcement model places principal reliance on member integrity.²⁹

²⁵Holman, Craig. “Current Perspectives for Ethics and Lobbying Reform: Problems and Solutions.” Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, February 7, 2026.

²⁶Bell, Peter. 2025. “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025.” Pew Research Center. December 4, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025>.

²⁷LaPira, Tim. 2014. “Erring on the Side of Shady: How Calling out ‘Lobbyists’ Drove Them Underground.” Sunlight Foundation. April 2014. <https://sunlightfoundation.com/2014/04/01/erring-on-the-side-of-shady-how-calling-out-lobbyists-drove-them-underground/>.

²⁸Under 2 U.S.C. § 1602(10), a person qualifies as a “lobbyist” only if lobbying activities constitute 20% or more of their time for a client during a quarterly period. This threshold has been widely exploited as a deregistration mechanism. See “The Lobbying Disclosure Act at 20: Analysis and Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service (CRS Report R44292). 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44292>.

²⁹Holman, Craig. “Current Perspectives for Ethics and Lobbying Reform: Problems and Solutions.” Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, February 7, 2026.

Major Conclusions and Recommendations

Section 302 was a promising idea in principle: it addressed a legitimate ethical problem, established clear behavioral boundaries, and signaled to the public that Congress was prepared to self-regulate. Its implementation, however, fell short in three critical respects. First, the provision's narrow scope was restricting only staff contacts rather than the member's own interactions which meant that motivated actors could route around its requirements with minimal effort. Second, the absence of any restriction on spousal lobbying before other members' offices left open a straightforward avenue for continuing influence. Third, the failure to pair the prohibition with robust enforcement mechanisms rendered it largely aspirational.

Whether Section 302 "worked" depends on how one defines success. Technical compliance was achieved: spousal lobbyists did stop contacting their spouse's staff. But the provision did not meaningfully reduce the financial influence of the lobbying industry on the legislative process,³⁰ and by incentivizing deregistration it arguably reduced transparency rather than enhancing it. Taken together, these effects support the conclusion that HLOGA's Section 302 was a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive reform.

The following reforms would address Section 302's principal deficiencies. First, the provision should be strengthened directly: extend the prohibition to cover the member's own communications with a lobbyist spouse, not merely staff contacts; prohibit spousal lobbyists from contacting any member's office, not just the employing member's staff, on matters in which the member's committee has jurisdiction; impose a mandatory recusal requirement when a

³⁰Fried, Charles, Rebecca Gordon, Trevor Potter, Joseph Sandler, and Ronald Levin. 2011. "Lobbying Law in the Spotlight: Challenges and Proposed Improvements." Report of the Task Force on Federal Lobbying Laws, Section of Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice, American Bar Association. https://campaignlegal.org/sites/default/files/ABA_Task_Force_Reprt_-_Lobbying_Law_in_the_Spotlight_-_Challenges_and_Proposed_Improvements.pdf.

member's spouse represents clients with a direct financial stake in legislation before the member's committee; and require itemized public disclosure of spousal lobbying income in financial disclosure forms.

Second, reform must directly address shadow lobbying. Specific measures should include: reducing the Lobbying Disclosure Act's 20% time threshold to 10%, or replacing it with a compensation-based registration trigger; expanding the statutory definition of "lobbying contact" to capture informal influence activities such as strategic advice and facilitated access; and substantially increasing civil and criminal penalties for willful failure to register.

Third, enforcement must be removed from the self-regulatory framework. An independent enforcement body adequately resourced and insulated from political pressure should be established with authority to conduct audits of lobbying disclosures, mandate real-time reporting of lobbying contacts, and maintain a publicly searchable database linking lobbying expenditures to legislative outcomes.³¹

Finally, and most fundamentally, any reform that does not address the structural dependency of members on campaign contributions from special interest groups will be incomplete. Stricter limits on lobbyist campaign contributions and aggregate caps on contributions from any single industry sector are necessary to reduce the underlying financial incentive that spousal lobbying arrangements serve.

Section 302, as part of the larger HLOGA, exemplifies the limitations of incremental ethics reform. By creating incentives for deregistration and shadow lobbying, it inadvertently

³¹Vogl, Frank. "Anti-Corruption, Politics, Ethics and Lobbying." Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, February 7, 2026.

reduced transparency rather than enhancing.³² Future reform efforts should focus on substantive rather than symbolic change, proactively close structural loopholes before they can be exploited, ensure robust and independent enforcement, and address the campaign finance system that gives rise to the conflicts Section 302 sought to solve.

³²Thurber, James. “Issues of Ethics and Lobbying in American Democracy.” Lecture, Workshop on Ethics & Lobbying, American University, Washington, DC, January 24, 2026. [CORRECTED: Same title error as footnote 7 — “America” corrected to “American.”]

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