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House, 411-8, Passes a Vast Ethics Overhaul

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WASHINGTON, July 31 — The House on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved sweeping ethics rules that would require lawmakers to disclose the names of lobbyists who gather more than \$15,000 in political contributions for them within a six-month period. The measure would also impose new restrictions on accepting gifts, discounted airfare and other long-held perquisites of office.

On a vote of 411 to 8, Democrats moved closer to fulfilling their pledge to change the culture of Washington, after a series of corruption scandals that played a role in [Republicans'](#) losing control of Congress in last November's elections. The legislation, to be considered by the Senate later this week, also calls for greater disclosure of legislators' special projects, or earmarks, which are often shrouded in secrecy.

Although advocates for tightened lobbying and ethics rules applauded the bill, some of its more onerous restrictions had been softened in recent weeks by House and Senate Democratic leaders, who worked in closed-door sessions to resolve its differing versions. Two Republican senators say they plan to try to stop the bill on the ground that it does not go far enough, but Senate leaders predicted that the measure would receive enough support to win passage, and President Bush is expected to sign it into law.

"The American people spoke clearly for change in the way business is done in Washington," Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) of California said after the House vote. "They demanded not just high ethical standards but also transparency, disclosure and accountability to make these standards effective."

Still, lawmakers left themselves some loopholes.

For instance, in January the Senate voted overwhelmingly for a "revolving door" provision that would have barred former lawmakers from all lobbying "activities" — among them plotting strategy or advising clients — for two years after leaving office. The provision would have seriously cramped the ability of legislators to cash out for big paychecks at K Street law firms as soon as they left office, and many complained that it would unfairly deprive them of their most natural occupation.

The House refused to pass a similar measure, and the final bill dropped the restriction. As a result, departing lawmakers, as well as their senior aides, will still be able to sell influence-seekers their insights and expertise immediately.

"As much as anything, it is a bow to the reality of life after Congress," said Marc E. Elias, a lawyer who represents many senators. "There has to be a limit to what behavior we are going to criminalize after people leave Congress."

Democratic leaders noted that the final bill retained provisions doubling the current one-year ban on former senators' direct lobbying contacts with onetime colleagues and that former senior Senate aides, already barred

from lobbying their previous office for one year, would now be forbidden to do so anywhere in the chamber during that period. House members must continue to honor a one-year ban against directly lobbying their former colleagues.

But the most far-reaching element of the bill — and the one that caused the most contentious behind-the-scenes negotiations — was the provisions requiring the disclosure of campaign contributions that lobbyists gather up from clients and associates to give to political candidates and the parties' Congressional campaign committees. The bill requires lawmakers and the committees to disclose the names of lobbyists who raise \$15,000 or more within a six-month period.

“Trying to preserve those provisions was a sticking point in the negotiations all along,” said Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, who led the push for them.

Because campaign finance laws cap individual contributions, politicians have become increasingly dependent on so-called bundlers to fill their campaign coffers. And lobbyists hoping to curry favor have the greatest incentive to do the work of dunning clients, colleagues, family and friends for stacks of campaign donations.

Even with the new rules, a lobbyist could still bundle \$14,000 every six months — \$56,000 during a House member's two-year term, a significant sum for a House re-election campaign — without any disclosure requirement.

And people involved in the final negotiations said House Democrats had blocked an effort by their Senate counterparts to weaken the rule by raising the threshold for disclosure to a significantly higher amount.

The overall package of rule changes was trumpeted by Democrats as a beam of sunlight on the murky ways in which lobbyists and interest groups influence legislation, but the process was hardly a model of open government. The final bill did not emerge until Monday, after a weekend of tense negotiations. Even as the House voted Tuesday to approve the rewritten legislation, lawyers and advocacy groups were still scrutinizing the text to decipher its implications.

The measure will require 67 votes to pass in the Senate, because it entails a change in Senate rules. At least two Republicans, Senators Jim DeMint of South Carolina and Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, oppose the bill, saying it is too weak on disclosure requirements for earmarks. But Republican aides said they expected it to be easily approved.

The legislation would for the first time require the disclosure of all earmarks — the pet projects lawmakers insert into spending bills — and their sponsors. It would also require that lawmakers certify that they are not adding a spending item intended only to provide a “pecuniary” benefit to themselves or their family.

The House has already adopted similar measures in its own internal rules. But while earlier bills had required a neutral Senate parliamentarian to validate the earmark disclosure in the Senate, the final bill shifted the enforcement authority to the Appropriations Committee chairman and the party leaders.

Democrats said they had made the revision to prevent bogging down the office of the parliamentarian with earmark inquiries, but some critics said putting enforcement in the hands of party leaders would dull much of the

new rules' bite.

“You have somebody who has a vested interest making the call,” said Steve Ellis, a vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, which tracks earmarks. “It is like an N.B.A. referee betting on games.”

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