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**The Changing Face(s) of K Street**



By **Norman Mineta**  
Vice Chairman, Hill & Knowlton

Over the three decades in Washington - in Congress, and then serving as Secretary of Commerce under President Clinton and Secretary of Transportation under President Bush, I've witnessed a lot of changes in the political power structure but none more sweeping than this year. Not only has President-elect Obama secured the White House with huge popular support but Democrats gained a commanding majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Democrats now hold more positions of power in Washington than they have had since the 1970s.

This sweeping change extends far beyond the administration and the political party in power. In my opinion, this change is going to extend to the way that we, as consultants and lobbyists, conduct business on behalf of our clients. In the coming weeks and months, it is going to be incumbent on us to read the political tea leaves and prepare to advise our clients on the best way to navigate this new terrain.

A backlash against lobbyists and other Washington consultants has been building since the 1990s when House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-TX) and former Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) conducted a campaign, dubbed the "K Street Project," to pressure corporations and business trade groups to fire Democrats and replace them with Republicans. The program included circulation around K Street of available Republican job candidates on the Hill and paid off with a number of former Republican aides being hired for influential positions.

In 2007, in direct response to this effort, Congressional leadership passed expansive legislation to curtail the influence of lobbyists and tighten congressional ethics rules that could punish members if they interfered with a lobbying shop's hiring practices. It also required Members of Congress and their senior staffers to disclose any job negotiations with K Street.

Now the pendulum is swinging the other way on K Street and as jobs open up, I believe you'll see more and more of these filled by Democrats. But even the lobbying firms with Democrats on staff are going to be facing a new landscape with the Obama

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administration. The president-elect has railed against special interest groups throughout his campaign and refused to accept any financial contributions from registered lobbyists.

The question now becomes: "Will all lobbyists and consultants, even the ones aligned with the Democratic majority, be considered personae non gratae in Washington?" President-elect Obama has 300-400 cabinet level and sub-cabinet level positions to fill through presidential appointments and presidential appointments with Senate confirmations (PAS) – it is unclear if former Hill staffers who have moved into careers in lobbying will be considered for any of these positions.

Another twist in this equation is how we advise our clients to proceed in the wake of the evolution of the Democratic Party platform. The Democratic Party has long been characterized as being more committed to the "liberal agenda" of championing the rights of labor and the "common man," while the Republican Party has been cast as the purveyor of free market ideals and a friend to big business and industry.

The Democrats might have an interesting balancing act as they try to reconcile their traditional positions and constituencies with the new face of American industry. For example, President-elect Obama is a strong advocate of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would strengthen the ability of workers to organize unions; and he also has pledged his commitment to train American workers so they can fill high- tech jobs, an industry that has traditionally been non-unionized. The challenge becomes protecting the rights of workers while supporting the growth and expansion of the high-tech industry – and preserving the Democrats' new-found majorities in historically Republican states.

While President-elect Obama surely will be sensitive to such nuances, an emboldened congressional leadership combined with a coalition of NGOs, environmental and labor groups that have waited eight years (and campaigned hard) for change, will likely prove less restrained. The K Street lobbyists and trade groups will have to retool, if they hope to be heard. So-called "special interests" must establish their connection to the "public interest" to be successful.

Old-school lobbying alone will not be sufficient. Industries, and the public affairs consultants who represent them, will need to conduct more targeted campaigns to get their messages heard. These campaigns may require more focus on paid advertising, earned media campaigns and grassroots efforts to shape public opinion. We must model our advocacy on the Obama campaign's high-tech and high-touch coalition building and mobilization – inside and outside the Washington Beltway. In a sense, it will bring more faces – and more open democracy – to K Street.



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