

Britannica Blog

[Lobbying the Taxpayers](#)

[David Boaz](#) - March 14, 2011

National Public Radio has been in the news this past week. In the snappy words of a *Wall Street Journal* headline on the resignation of CEO Vivian Schiller, "[Video Kills the Radio Czar](#)." But besides revealing its staffers' real attitudes on tape, NPR has been up to something else lately. And as Michael Kinsley might have been the first to say, "The real scandal in Washington is what's legal."

In response to threats by newly elected Republicans to cut off taxpayer funding for NPR, PBS, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, public broadcasters have used all their communications vehicles to push back. Bert, Ernie, Big Bird, and Arthur the Aardvark [have gone to Capitol Hill](#) to lobby for more money. Between broadcasts of "Downton Abbey" and "Frontline," PBS viewers are implored to call their congressman and keep the money flowing. Public radio websites [blare](#) "Protect KCRW, Write your representative, write your senator." Announcements on the radio carry the same message.

Now I'm not surprised to read that [liberal groups like MoveOn.org are mobilizing](#) to save tax-funded broadcasting – why wouldn't they? – but it's their money and they can spend it the way they want to. What does concern me is that public broadcasting itself is paid for with tax dollars, which means that our taxes are being used to turn around and lobby our elected officials to send more of our tax dollars to those recipients. (How much tax money goes to public broadcasting? Good question. They have perhaps not inadvertently created a complex system that is hard to analyze. One congressman [says](#), "We asked the Congressional Research Service to look at the books, and a senior analyst got back to us and said it was like a spaghetti bowl — those were his exact words." Another analysis [concludes](#) that 25 percent of NPR funding is ultimately taxpayer-derived.)

But NPR and PBS aren't the only people using our own money to lobby us for more money. My colleague Richard Rahn [complains](#), "Taxpayer dollars are also used to fund international organizations, which, in turn, lobby the U.S. Congress for not only more money for themselves, but also for higher taxes on the American people. In recent years, one of the most notorious examples has been the little known Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), based in France. The OECD has argued that Americans need to pay more in taxes; claims that tax-rate competition among nations is harmful, ignoring the fact that competition forces governments to prioritize better and be less wasteful; insists that Americans and others should give up their basic right of financial privacy; and supports programs that are driving needed foreign investment out of the United States."

The Hill newspaper [reported](#) in 2009, “Auto companies and eight of the country’s biggest banks that received tens of billions of dollars in federal bailout money spent more than \$20 million on lobbying Washington lawmakers in the first half of this year.” Later in the year the Huffington Post [found](#), “Twenty-five top recipients of government bailout funds spent more than \$71 million on lobbying in the year since they were rescued.” And the National Legal and Policy Center [found](#) that General Motors – perhaps better known these days as Government Motors – was stepping up its lobbying two years after being bailed out.

The Pacific Research Institute [estimated](#) that municipalities, counties, regional authorities (including transportation, waste management, water, and recreation), and state and regional commissions, along with organizations that drew all or virtually all of their funding from taxpayer sources, accounted for 24 percent of all the reported lobbying in California in 2007 and 2008, making government lobbying far larger than that of any other “industry.”

This has been going on for a long time. As far back as 1985, the Cato Institute published a book, [*Destroying Democracy: How Government Funds Partisan Politics*](#), that exposed how billions of taxpayers’ dollars were used to subsidize organizations with a political agenda, mostly groups that lobbied and organized for bigger government and more spending. The book noted that the National Council of Senior Citizens had received more than \$150 million in taxpayers’ money in four years. A more recent report estimated that [AARP had received over a billion dollars in taxpayer funding](#). Both groups, of course, lobby heavily for more spending on Social Security and Medicare. Author James T. Bennett updated the research in [*Tax-Funded Politics*](#) in 2004. The Heritage Foundation [reported](#) in 1995, “Each year, the American taxpayers provide more than \$39 billion in grants to organizations which may use the money to advance their political agendas.” In 1999 Peter Samuel and Randal O’Toole found that [EPA was a major funder of groups lobbying for “smart growth.”](#) So these groups were pushing a policy agenda on the federal government, but the government itself was paying the groups to lobby it.

Lobbying is constitutionally protected. The [First Amendment](#) guarantees not just freedom of speech and of the press but also “the right of the people...to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” But does that mean the government itself has a right to petition itself for a piece of the pie?

Taxpayers shouldn’t have to pay for the very lobbying that seeks to extract more dollars from them. As [Thomas Jefferson](#) wrote in the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty: “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical.” To compel him to furnish contributions of money to petition his elected officials to demand more contributions from him just adds insult to injury.