



Here's why the autonomous vehicle industry needs lobbyists already

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You can't buy an autonomous vehicle yet, but the fledgling industry has already begun lobbying the government, hiring a former administrator for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"It is sad that industries that haven't even been created yet have to hire Washington lobbyists," said Chris Edwards, the director of tax studies at the Cato Institute.

But they do, which means the anti-lobbyists lobbyists also have to get busy.

In an open letter released earlier this month, four consumer advocacy groups have called for ending the revolving door between NHTSA and lobbying groups advocating on behalf of autonomous vehicles.

"A troubling aspect of your administration's unjustified rush to deploy autonomous vehicles is the role that former NHTSA officials are playing in promoting robot cars," said the letter from Public Citizen, the Center for Auto Safety, Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety, and Consumer Watchdog.

These groups don't like that David Strickland, a former NHTSA head, left the agency in 2014 to lobby for the autonomous vehicle industry, which includes Google, Lyft, Uber, Ford and Volvo. They also noted that "three other top NHTSA officials now represent Google and its self-driving car program before their former colleagues."

But why does the autonomous vehicle lobby even exist in the first place?

After all, General Motors – just one of the companies developing autonomous vehicle technology – doesn't expect the cars to be part of on-demand Uber-like networks until 2021, and it estimates that individuals will have to wait until 2026 to buy their own, a full decade away.

The size, scope, and power of the federal government play a role.

“The basic problem is that the federal government has so much power and control over so many industries that the number of federal bureaucracy positions has mushroomed over the years, and so the federal government’s control has increased,” Edwards said.

As a result, industries regularly turn to the only people with the specialized knowledge, experience and expertise to help them navigate these regulations: the regulators themselves.

Strickland business

After Strickland left his position at the NHTSA in 2014, he went to work in government relations for Venable LLP, a law firm that represents several non-profit auto industry organizations, including the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

In April, Strickland became the spokesperson and counsel for the Self-Driving Coalition for Safer Streets and a vocal advocate for autonomous vehicles.

“David Strickland possesses the experience and expertise to bring the benefits of self-driving technology to America’s roads and highways,” the Self-Driving Coalition told Watchdog in an email. “He has been a longtime proponent of self-driving vehicles and the potential safety benefits that they can provide.”

There are those words again: experience and expertise.

“Because self-driving technology has the potential to reshape personal transportation and even societal mores for generations to come at a staggering investment of public funds ... the people are poorly served by allowing even the perception of impropriety to taint the development/introduction process,” Gary Biller, president of the National Motorists Association, said in an email to Watchdog.

What can be done, though, given that industries – and advocacy groups – have powerful incentives to hire former regulators for their expertise, experience and connections?

One idea is to remove those incentives.

The solution is to reduce the power and control of government and increase transparency, since curbs on the revolving door don’t usually work, Edwards said. Until that solution is implemented, “It’s understandable that private industries will want to defend themselves as best they can by hiring insiders.”

The letter from the anti-“robot cars” groups didn’t address this solution. Once you get to the signatures, you’ll know why.

Feat of Claybrook

In the final irony of the revolving door debate for an industry that doesn't exist yet, one of the signatories of the anti-autonomous vehicle letter – Joan Claybrook – is a former NHTSA administrator herself.

Given that reality, is Claybrook really the best person to call for the end of the revolving door?

After all, while currently the president emeritus of Public Citizen, Claybrook has been involved with transportation regulation and anti-industry advocacy throughout her career, bouncing between government and advocacy organizations.

From 1966 to 1970, she worked as a special assistant to the administrator in the National Traffic Safety Bureau, which became the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in late 1970.

Claybrook then left government for a time and worked for the Public Interest Research Group, a self-proclaimed consumer advocacy group, from 1970 to 1972 and also worked with the Congress Project in 1972 – an investigation by Ralph Nader into the U.S. Congress.

From 1973 to 1977, Claybrook acted as director of Public Citizen's Congress Watch, another group founded by Nader.

President Jimmy Carter appointed Claybrook administrator of NHTSA in 1977 – a role she held through the four years of the Carter administration. Then in 1982, she returned to consumer advocacy and lobbying and became president of Public Citizen, a position she held until she stepped down in 2009.

Claybrook did not respond to requests for comment.

But consumer advocates have long argued that their revolving door is less insidious than the one used by industry because, in effect, their motives are pure.

Suffice to say, not everyone buys that argument.

“I think the fundamental question is whether [the four advocacy groups] have the same concerns over her revolving door activities as David Strickland,” Richard Lazar of the Autonomous Vehicle Law Center said in an interview with Watchdog.

While the question is valid in principle, Lazar also pointed out that Claybrook's situation is somewhat different than Strickland's since she left the agency decades ago and most of her former colleagues are long gone from NHTSA.

Some of them have even become lobbyists.