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'Third House' first in line

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Sacramento's highest-spending lobbying groups are government worker unions.

Lobbying, unsurprisingly, is commonplace and aggressive in U.S. state capitals and in Washington, D.C. Special interests and their paid representatives flock to legislators and bureaucrats, seeking favors, like pigs rushing to a full trough. The problem at the state and municipal level is that too many treasuries are depleted, and to refill the troughs special interests urge policymakers to find or enhance "revenue sources" - a euphemism for new or higher taxes.

In Sacramento, the California Teachers Association, the state's behemoth education union, spent more money on lobbying in 2011 than any other group in the Golden State, according a Los Angeles Times analysis of data from the California Secretary of State's Office.

The CTA, boasting 340,000 members, spent \$6,574,257 last year, a lobbying tab more than \$1.5 million greater than the second-place spender (unsurprisingly, another union), the California State Council of Service Employees, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union, one of the largest and most powerful labor outfits in North America.

Overall expenditures for lobbying state legislators hit an all-time high in 2011 of \$286.6 million-that's a 6.8 percent jump from 2010. It seems lobbyists saw an opportunity to refill the trough of tax money with Gov. Jerry Brown once again at the helm of the state.

Lobbyists are so influential in Sacramento and elsewhere they deserve to be called the "Third House" - a nickname describing lobbyists as an unelected chamber of the Legislature beyond the Assembly and state Senate. It's not uncommon for legislators and their staff, looking for guidance on a pending bill, to "to run it by the Third House."

In off-year elections, lobbying expenditures are highlighted but those who lobby the most are usually also the same who spend the most on campaigns. In 2010, many will remember the spending spree of unions to help Gov. Brown win election and the millions spent by unions on California ballot initiatives.

Teachers union expenditures on 2010 ballot measures totaled \$25.5 million, according to UnionWatch.org, a watchdog website devoted to tracking union activity. That total includes expenditures from the CTA, the National Education Association, the California Federation of Teachers, the American Federation of Teachers and the Alliance for a Better California, a coalition that includes public employee unions.

It should come as no surprise that unions continue making such "political investments," especially because they are paying off. In the decade ending in 2010, the CTA spent more than \$200 million on lobbying, political expenditures and campaign contributions, more than any other entity and over \$100 million more than the second-place special interest, California State Council of Service Employees, according to a 2010 report by the California Fair Political Practices Commission. So it should come as no shock that these groups finished atop the list for lobbying activity last year.

Teachers unions, as noted by analyst Andrew Coulson of the libertarian **Cato Institute**, have many objectives. Five key priorities include: "raising their members' wages; growing their membership, increasing the share of the public school labor force that they represent, precluding pay based on performance or aptitude and minimizing competition from nonunion shops."

A quick examination of public policy in California, teacher pay and pensions, the power of the education establishment and the state of educational institutions in California illustrates the success teachers unions have had in achieving such goals.

Their expenditures and strategies are more self-serving than much of anything else. Lisa Snell, Reason Foundation's director of education and child welfare, noted as much when she wrote, "The unions engage in political spending on issues that have little to do with education or directly benefiting their members and their political spending is used again and again to block legitimate discourse about education reform in California."

"In my personal experience the unions literally drown out other voices, and this means even the most marginal education reforms never make it," Snell said.

Offsetting the power of unions in the state and country is required for meaningful structural reform or even incremental procedural changes, hence why so many resources and eyeballs are focused on the union-led recall of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who has waged political warfare with public employee unions.

In California, the best hope may be this year's Stop Special Interest Money Now ballot initiative which seeks to curb the political spending abilities of unions and corporations. In the meantime though, expect more frenzied feeding at the trough.