

Tougher Rules Being Sought by Freshmen

The Hill

By Jonathan E. Kaplan

(Washington, DC) - Lobbying reform is causing headaches for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), now tasked with repairing a split in her caucus as freshmen advocate for stricter rules while some senior members fight to preserve the status quo.

Rep. Jason Altmire (D-Pa.) and his fellow freshman Democrats are clamoring to pass a lobbying reform bill over the objections of some entrenched conservative lawmakers and congressmen who represent poor districts.

During the freshman Democrats' weekly breakfast with Pelosi yesterday, they championed the idea of political reform without discussing the specifics of the bill set to be marked up today by the Judiciary Committee.

"We spent a year and a half on the campaign trail talking about the issue," Altmire said. "We talked about it during orientation last November. We want to stand together and tell the story."

The divisions pit the freshmen against some Blue Dog Democrats and some members of the Congressional Black and Hispanic caucuses who object on three points: the two-year ban on lobbying Congress, the provisions addressing bundling and how the law would work in practice.

"This bill would not prosecute people who are dishonest; It would do nothing but make people happy," a Southern Democrat said.

The split within the party could lead to a nasty floor flight. Some Blue Dog Democrats have threatened to vote against the rule to stop the legislation from reaching the House floor.

"There's a real chance the rule could be defeated," a Democratic aide said.

House Democratic leaders are searching for a way to ameliorate concerns about the two-year lobbying ban. Having voted for a two-year provision last year, Democratic leaders are wary of reversing their position, fearing a backlash from liberal advocacy groups and the media. Leadership is discussing a one-year proposal with teeth: As soon as a lawmaker

files papers with the ethics committee that he or she is searching for a job, that member would have to recuse him- or herself from all business related to the policy area.

Some lawmakers voiced concerns about how the bill's requirements would work in practice.

"I want a bill to give us disclosure without creating confusion - some things won't work the way you thought once they're in writing," said Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.), who added that he now was comfortable with the proposed legislation and would vote for it on the House floor.

Lawmakers who represent poor districts and some who are not independently wealthy object to the so-called bundling provision because it would make it harder for them to raise money, several Democratic lawmakers said.

It can be difficult for lawmakers who represent poorer districts and those who are not affluent to raise money because they lack personal connections to wealthy individuals. Such members often have to spend significantly more time to raise the same amount of money as affluent lawmakers.

The less well-off lawmakers are worried that potential donors would be reluctant to help raise money if their names were disclosed.

Moreover, the lawmakers object to the provision because they say it suggests there is a direct correlation between money raised and legislative action taken.

They would prefer a lobbying reform bill to be accompanied by broader changes in the campaign-finance system.

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) argued during the Democrats' weekly caucus meeting on Tuesday that the only way to eliminate public pessimism is to move to a system in which elections are financed publicly.

"It's never enough. Someone will always say we're doing something or not doing something because of a contribution," Meeks, who represents Queens, said, adding that only public financing of elections could change the public's perception of Congress.

Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) said the lobbying reform bill is a "diversionary tactic."

During the meeting, she encouraged her colleagues to move beyond public financing by adopting laws - similar to some British measures - that limit the length of the campaign season and provide free television airtime, normally a campaign's biggest expense.

To be sure, the split is not clear-cut. Some longtime members are supporting the bill and some freshman Democrats, while supportive of the legislation, object to the bundling provision.