

Manuscript Overview

Autocrats and Their Lobbyists:

The Politics of Foreign Influence

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Governments around the world invest billions of dollars each year to shape American policy. Under contract to foreign governments – and, accordingly, acting on their behalf – Washington lobbyists meet with American lawmakers, fund their congressional campaigns, draft the legislative bills they sponsor, pressure the executive branch and agencies, disseminate media kits to leading newspapers, and build policy alliances among stakeholders.

Which of the world's governments invest most heavily in Washington lobbyists? Why? When? What do they get in return? Drawing on fieldwork in Central Africa and East Asia, our central argument is that Washington lobbying is a critical tool for the world's worst governments to advance their domestic political interests. Moreover, we suspect that lobbying works: that the world's autocrats routinely purchase a measure of international immunity from domestic human rights violations.

The anecdotal evidence from Central Africa is striking. The governments that spend the most on Washington lawmakers are generally its least democratic, and often its most repressive. President Denis Sassou Nguesso has ruled the Republic of Congo for all but five years since 1979, and accumulated among the world's worst human rights records. Nonetheless, after contracting a lobbying campaign worth some \$20m over five years, he received debt relief from the World Bank

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and IMF. The event marked a watershed in Congolese politics. It ended Sassou Nguesso's reliance on Western creditors, and hence the international community's capacity to sanction him for human rights violations. In 2009, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea hired Qorvis Communications to conduct an extensive public relations campaign on his behalf. For a monthly retainer of just \$60k, Qorvis routinely courted *The New York Times*, Associated Press, CNBC, and *Washington Post*; issues press releases trumpeting Obiang's great economic and human rights record; and stages interviews with the country's senior political figures, which it then distributes as legitimate news programs on YouTube.¹ In reality, since deposing his uncle in a 1979 coup, Obiang has accumulated among the world's very worst human rights records. Freedom House called him "the worst of the worst." Reporters Without Borders labeled him a "predator." "Are they enabling a dictatorship to exist and to get away with atrocities?," one Equatoguinean asylee in the United States asked rhetorically. "Without a doubt. That's exactly why they're hired."

To explore its hypotheses more systematically, this book draws on an original dataset of all lobbying activities ever undertaken by foreign governments in the United States since 1945. The database exploits the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which requires all agents who represent foreign principals to file detailed activity reports every six months. These activity reports, referred to as Supplemental Statements, are then made available on a website, which FARA requires the US Department of Justice to maintain.² These Supplemental Statements include wealth of information: every penny foreign governments transfer to Washington lobbyists, every contact that Washington lobbyists undertake with American government officials and media outlets on the foreign government's behalf, every campaign contribution Washington lobbyists make while under contract, and much more. Once completed, this dataset will offer the first complete, fully searchable history of foreign lobbying in the United States. We intend to maintain the dataset in real time, long after the book is completed.

¹See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEj1XKD_Cw0&feature=youtu.be. At one point, the Qorvis employee asks the Ambassador of Equatorial Guinea to the United States what advice he would give other African countries about "what to do" to foster democracy and economic growth.

²www.fara.gov.