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Posted By: [cprim72](#) Sun Aug 5, 2007 9:53 am | [Options](#)

As nation embraces ethics reform, Michigan shrugs

Mark Hornbeck and Charlie Cain / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070803/POLITICS/708030385/1022>

LANSING -- The congressional ethics reform movement storming Washington this week isn't likely to take hold anytime soon in Michigan's capital, where disclosure, campaign reporting and lobby regulation laws have been labeled everything from "inadequate" to "downright pathetic."

Partisan squabbling and special interest pressure are partly to blame for the lack of ethics reform momentum in Lansing, political watchdogs say. But the main culprit: There has been no big scandal here to grab people's attention and drive change.

"There really hasn't been a caught-red-handed, overt scandal like there has been in Washington, D.C., Ohio or Illinois," said Rich Robinson, executive director of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a nonpartisan group that watches money and politics in this state.

Robinson described Michigan ethics laws as "downright pathetic," and said the state's ethics movement currently is "in hibernation."

Just last month, the Center for Public Integrity gave Michigan a grade of "F" because it does not require financial disclosure by candidates for governor and lawmakers. It is one of three states that have no such requirement.

"Requiring them to disclose their private financial ties could reveal possible conflict of interest," said Leah Rush, who took part in the study by the nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based public policy research group.

John Chamberlin, chairman of Common Cause of Michigan, agreed that the lack of high-profile political corruption here has bogged down reform efforts. But he added that Michigan's lax laws may be masking a problem.

"Jack Abramoff hasn't happened here," he said, referring to the Washington lobbyist scandal. "But given the state of reporting and disclosure, if he's sitting out there, we wouldn't know about it."

The Senate sent to the White House on Thursday a bill requiring lawmakers to pay for private plane rides and to disclose more about their efforts to fund pet projects -- so-called "earmarks" -- and accepting contributions from lobbyists.

Congress also has been wracked in recent years by scandals that have sent two Republican lawmakers to prison along with lobbyist Abramoff, who was convicted of federal corruption charges over congressional spending bills. A House Democrat also faces bribery charges.

Pork-barreling hasn't been a major problem in Michigan, partly due to the governor's line-item veto, which the president lacks. That tool allows the governor to cross out any program, without vetoing an entire budget bill.

But the state requires no personal financial disclosure from lawmakers, judges or the governor. So residents here have no idea if their elected state officials are working in the public interest or their own.

And lobbyist controls remain lax. They don't have to report what they spend on food, drink or gifts for a lawmaker unless it exceeds \$53 for a single bill or \$325 a year. Airfare less than \$700 doesn't need to be reported.

Michigan has laws restricting bundling of political contributions, but according to Robinson, there's virtually no reporting and no enforcement.

"Maybe you could say there's no bundling going on here, but I'd say that's far-fetched," Robinson said.

Michigan has no restrictions on the "revolving door" between the Legislature and the lobbying corps. In the past couple of decades, House Speakers Bobby Crim, Gary Owen, Lew Dodak and Rick Johnson went straight from the state House to lobbying jobs. The Center for Public Integrity reported that as of 2005, 43 ex-lawmakers were lobbying the Legislature.

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Several bills to address these issues have been passed by the House but stalled in the Senate.

"Michigan is giving a free pass to legislators and depriving its citizens of basic information," said House Majority Floor Leader Steve Tobocman, D-Detroit.

Tobocman sponsored a financial disclosure act that cleared the House and sits in the Senate.

"It's not a popular thing to do even though it's standard business in 47 other states," he said. "I have encountered personal animosity from both sides of the aisle.

"Until there is public outrage, these reasonable things won't move forward."

Matt Marsden, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester, said Senate Republicans are interested in moving ethics legislation but not until the state's pressing budget woes are resolved.

"Sen. Bishop supports campaign oversight efforts and when he was in the House co-sponsored legislation to require financial disclosure statements," Marsden said. "Once we get Michigan back on good economic footing, you'll see more action on the Senate side in terms of campaign and election reform."

Detroit News Staff Writer Deb Price contributed to this report. You can reach Mark Hornbeck at (313) 222-2470 or mhornbeck@...

House-passed reform bills have stalled in the Senate.

* House Bill 4285 would require candidates for state and some local offices to file annual financial disclosure statements with the Secretary of State. Violators would be subject to a misdemeanor charge, punishable by up to 90 days in jail and/or a fine of up to \$1,000.

* House Bill 4315 would prohibit state lawmakers from voting on legislation when they have a substantial conflict of interest. Disciplinary action against violators would be up to the members of the House or Senate.

* House Bill 4313 would impose a one-year moratorium before a departing lawmaker, governor, attorney general or secretary of state could engage in lobbying.

Congress cleans up

Key provisions in the ethics bill passed by the House and Senate this week:

* Lawmakers must disclose lobbyists who raise \$15,000 or more for them within six months by "bundling" campaign donations from numerous givers.

* Senators seeking a special spending project, or "earmark," must disclose it two days before a vote. (The House adopted similar requirements in January.)

* Senators and candidates for the Senate and White House must pay full charter fare when traveling on private airplanes. House members and candidates may not accept trips on private planes.

* Senators and their staffs may not accept gifts from lobbyists and their clients. (The House adopted a gift ban in January.)

* Former senators must wait two years before lobbying Congress. Ex-House members and aides must wait one year.

* Lawmakers convicted of bribery, perjury or similar crimes would lose their retirement benefits.

Sources: Detroit News research; Associated Press

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