



11-05-2005

Lobbying & Law - Blunt's K Street Team

Bara Vaida and Lisa Caruso ([Email this author](#))

© National Journal Group, Inc.

In early January 2005, the House Republican leadership's prospects for pass-ing the Central American Free Trade Agreement looked dim. Powerful interests, from the sugar industry to labor unions, lined up against the pact, and most of Washington doubted the GOP could muster enough votes to push it through.

The burden of corralling the votes fell on House Majority Whip **Roy Blunt**, R-Mo. Brian Gaston, his chief of staff, phoned a dozen or so of Blunt's confidants -- K Street lobbyists with A-list experience on the Hill, inside the White House, and within the political parties -- as he had many times before. Blunt calls them "great assets in trying to marshal whatever resources are out there to get a hard job done."

On numerous occasions, these lobbyists have helped Blunt secure the votes to pass legislation by drawing on their relationships with individual lawmakers, clients, and other Washington power brokers. To get CAFTA over the top, Blunt needed to bring 50 to 70 undecided House members into the "yes" camp.

Although the whip team could call on a broad coalition of trade groups and lobbying organizations working on the pro-CAFTA side, Blunt wanted input from the small, trusted group of informal advisers whose views he seeks on all of the big votes.

"At the time, Roy was the only guy who was talking about getting it done," said a lobbyist whom Gaston called and who didn't want to be quoted by name. "Everyone thought he was crazy. But he had a plan, and he implemented it."

Republican lobbyist Kirsten Chadwick, senior vice president at Fierce, Isakowitz & Blalock, and Democratic lobbyist Steve Champlin, vice president at the Duberstein Group, were central to executing the plan. They met weekly with the coalition to help Blunt and the House leadership line up votes. The effort included scores of lobbyists, House Republicans and Democrats who supported the trade pact, administration officials, and allies in the Senate. (See sidebar, opposite.)

On July 28, the House passed CAFTA, 217-215. The hard-fought victory underscored the effectiveness of using a coalition approach to move major legislation.

Chadwick is also among the handful of lobbyists that Blunt seeks out for strategic counsel. According to Blunt's office, the other lobbyists he is closest to are Nick Calio, senior vice president of global

government affairs at Citigroup; Ed Gillespie, co-chairman of Quinn Gillespie & Associates; Steve Hart, chairman and CEO of Williams & Jensen; Gregg Hartley, vice chairman and chief operating officer of Cassidy & Associates; Susan Hirschmann, partner at Williams & Jensen; David Hobbs, president of the Hobbs Group; Dave Hoppe, vice chairman of Quinn Gillespie & Associates; Mark Isakowitz, president of Fierce, Isakowitz & Blalock; Kathryn Lehman, partner at Holland & Knight; David Lugar, director at Quinn Gillespie & Associates; Drew Maloney, partner at the Federalist Group; Dan Mattoon, co-chairman of PodestaMattoon; and Lisa Nelson, senior vice president and director of government relations at Visa USA.

Others he consults often are Ali Amirhooshmand, a vice president at Cassidy & Associates, and Samantha Cook, director of government affairs at Fierce, Isakowitz & Blalock.

Blunt does not meet with these lobbyists as a group, although all attend various sessions that the whip team organizes either to move specific bills or to discuss the party's legislative agenda.

"These are people [Blunt] has known for a long time, and he trusts their opinion and their advice," a Blunt aide explained. They've been there in the trenches, and they know how to get things done. This is who helps us win, time and time again."

National Journal contacted everyone on the list. Some quibbled about whether they should be included in a story, and some declined to comment, but most were willing to speak about the roles they play in helping Blunt.

None, however, wanted to discuss the potential for a race to replace Rep. **Tom DeLay**, R-Texas, as majority leader if DeLay's legal troubles drag on, or to say whether they would support Blunt in such a race. DeLay was forced to step aside on September 28 following his indictment in Texas on campaign finance-related charges. At that time, Blunt temporarily assumed some of DeLay's duties as majority leader while continuing to fulfill his responsibilities as whip.

"I don't think that [House Speaker] Denny [Hastert, R-Ill.] or anyone else would appreciate getting calls from K Street on who should be leader," said one of Blunt's allies.

Cultivating a set of K Street "advisers" is nothing new for House leaders. But Blunt and his whip team have brought a higher level of structure and systematization to the House GOP's outreach to K Street.

Ever since the Republicans took control of the House in 1995, working with private-sector allies has been a hallmark of the party's governing strategy. Former House Republican Conference Chairman **John Boehner**, R-Ohio, convened a weekly sit-down with the heads of trade associations and interest groups, while DeLay, as whip, met regularly with lobbyists to round up support for votes and pushed K Street firms to hire Republicans and increase the amount of money they gave to the GOP.

The link between K Street and the GOP leadership has only grown stronger as top staffers to DeLay, former Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and other leaders have left the Hill to join the lobbying ranks. Blunt, who as chief deputy whip under DeLay oversaw coalition efforts, has many friends on K Street. When Blunt was elected whip in 2002, he built on DeLay's success. Along with Rep. **Mike Rogers**, R-Mich., his deputy whip in charge of coalitions, Blunt has transformed an effective but loosely organized initiative into a formalized structure for enlisting the party's K Street allies to advance the House Republican agenda.

But the roots of the whip operation's partnership with lobbyists and outside groups go back to 1980, when now-Sen. **Trent Lott**, R-Miss., was elected House Republican whip. Lott was instrumental in moving newly elected President Reagan's Republican agenda through a Democratic House, said Quinn Gillespie's Hoppe, who logged 16 years with Lott, the only member of Congress to have served as whip in both the House and the Senate.

Hoppe noted that as the minority party in the House, Republicans needed Democrats' votes to pass Reagan's tax cuts and fund his defense buildup. "That involved working inside [the House] with Democrats and Republicans, working with the administration, working with outside groups ... trying to find out where all your allies were to bring the right people to bear at the right time to get the votes you needed," Hoppe said.

It was the model used later by Democratic whips Tom Foley, D-Wash., and Tony Coelho, D-Calif., in the 1980s, Hoppe said, adding, "DeLay took it to a whole new level, and **Roy Blunt** has done a good job of moving it forward from there ... [making] it a much more broad and effective operation."

Blunt and his staff now regularly consult with roughly 500 lobbyists with K Street shops, trade associations, corporate Washington offices, and interest groups, according to Blunt's office. These lobbyists meet throughout the year with Blunt, Chief Deputy Majority Whip **Eric Cantor**, R-Va., House GOP Conference Chairwoman **Deborah Pryce**, R-Ohio, and Rogers, and participate in various coalitions the whip team assembles to pass tough legislation. In 2003, Blunt also married a lobbyist who represents Altria Group, the parent company of the cigarette maker Philip Morris and the food company Kraft. Blunt's wife, Abigail Blunt, has agreed not to lobby anyone in the House, and Blunt recuses himself from Altria issues.

Separate from the coalitions created to build support for a particular piece of legislation, Blunt's inner circle of K Street advisers is a kind of "intelligence network." It acts, said one lobbyist, as an extra set of eyes and ears that provides "a lot more access to what members are actually saying to each other and not just what they are saying for public consumption."

Further, many of the lobbyists have personal relationships with lawmakers, and so can help Blunt gather

the intelligence to secure a member's vote. That comes in handy for Blunt on issues such as passage of the annual budget resolution, which has no natural outside constituency that can provide the foundation for a coalition. "There are always the same four to seven issues" on the budget that are going to be controversial, such as agriculture, defense, and veterans affairs spending, a Blunt aide said. To help smooth out problems that lawmakers may have had with those issues, Blunt has tapped his network to find out what individual members might need.

Hobbs, who headed the White House office of legislative affairs after serving as chief of staff to then-House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, describes it as "a keep-your-ear-to-the-ground kind of thing. Maybe you're shooting the breeze and you hear something, or you're at a fundraiser and have a little more time to talk and you hear something" that you can pass along.

Others, like Holland & Knight's Lehman, who until this past May was chief of staff to the House Republican Conference, said working on the Hill can be like living "inside a bubble" and the discussions with downtown lobbyists are a helpful reality check. "When you're on the Hill, you think everybody knows what you know," Lehman said. "You think everyone has access to the same information. The problem is that sometimes you just miss the obvious."

Almost all of the lobbyists work at bipartisan firms and also consult closely with Democrats on issues. Some are friends with Democratic lawmakers and provide a way for Blunt and the GOP leadership team to learn what the House Democratic Caucus is saying about a piece of legislation, or what its strategy is for opposing a measure. "We pass on intelligence on what Democrats are thinking," said Lehman.

Getting information on the Democrats is crucial because the Republican margin in the House is currently just 13; on difficult votes such as CAFTA, GOP leaders cannot count on support from all Republicans. As Mattoon, a former deputy chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, said, "There isn't much margin for error."

In an interview, Blunt said he knows that many people believe "there is an agenda somehow set by K Street." In fact, he said, "we reach out to K Street in the broadest possible context and [say], 'Here's what we're going to do, are you interested in getting this done or not?' And if the answer is yes, we try to figure how they can help us get that particular piece of work done."

And while lobbyists may work committees "very aggressively during the effort to get a bill ready to go to the floor," Blunt noted, "our relationship with them is almost always [after the bill is drafted], where we're really ready to get down to the hard work of getting the bill passed."

Information can also go in the other direction, helping the leadership stay on message in the media. In the weeks since Blunt took on his temporary duties as majority leader, his office has put out the word that Blunt is focused on the Republican agenda, which includes spending cuts and immigration reform.

Gaston, Blunt's chief of staff, "was eager to have it get out that the basic game plan going forward is to emphasize things that House Republicans want to emphasize and not what the White House wants or the Senate wants, but what the base wants House leaders to focus on," said the same lobbyist who didn't want to be identified.

Of course, deep ties between Blunt and his K Street confidants are good for business. Almost all of the contract lobbyists in Blunt's circle are successful rainmakers with a broad spectrum of big-name clients. Their continued access to House leaders keeps them in demand.

For the most part, these lobbyists are also reliable fundraisers for the GOP, although all emphasize that when Blunt calls for their advice, they don't discuss fundraising with him. For the 2006 election cycle, these lobbyists together had donated \$267,742 to Republican candidates and parties, and \$22,000 to Blunt's political action committee as of October 11, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

The lobbyists stressed that what they get out of their close relationship with Blunt is the satisfaction of helping friends and political allies accomplish common goals, albeit ones that their clients happen to share.

"I'm happy to offer whatever advice I can and whatever intelligence I can and help pass their agenda, because it's one that I believe in," Hobbs said. Mattoon added, "We want to keep the people that we agree with on the issues in the majority."

Still, the K Street connection worries campaign finance watchdogs, who argue that such coziness gives interest groups and the business community too much influence. Blunt's ties to K Street show "how intertwined and interconnected he is with these lobbyists," said Larry Noble, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics. "They aren't just lobbying him on bills, but are part of his inner [team of] strategists, and that gets them a leg up on everyone else."

But Blunt's aides said that they don't offer their K Street allies anything for their help -- although having such access to GOP power brokers can only burnish the lobbyists' credentials and reputations.

"It's not that we're doing this big favor for them," said one Blunt aide. "They may benefit to the extent that their business is based on having good relationships [with top congressional leaders and staff] and they have good relationships with us by working with us. But there's nothing specific that they get in return."

The Group of 500

Beyond the lobbyists who are close advisers to Majority Whip **Roy Blunt**, R-Mo., the whip operation casts a wide net in enlisting help from allies off the Hill, as well as from Bush administration officials and sympathetic Democratic members.

Roughly 500 people from K Street lobby shops, trade associations, corporate Washington offices, and interest groups work with the whip's office, according to aides to Blunt. The whip is also the temporary majority leader.

The 500 -- of whom 75 to 100 are Democrats -- also meet in smaller groups from time to time with Blunt; Chief Deputy Majority Whip **Eric Cantor**, R-Va.; **Mike Rogers**, R-Mich., Blunt's deputy whip for coalitions; and House Republican Conference Chairwoman **Deborah Pryce**, R-Ohio, to discuss the GOP agenda and offer advice.

The whip operation relies on this group of 500 to form coalitions to help move legislation. While Blunt, Cantor, Rogers, and their staffs take care of the vote-counting operation, Pryce's team is in charge of the party's message to other members and to the media.

Occasionally all 500 are brought together, for instance, when top committee chairmen, or House and Senate leaders, make a presentation to the group.

Rank-and-file members and their staffs are also integral players, according to staffers to Blunt and Rogers. During the push to enact the Central American Free Trade Agreement, for example, Rep. **Sue Myrick**, R-N.C., worked on the textile language, and Rep. **Phil English**, R-Pa., addressed CAFTA's effects on Northeast manufacturers. Democratic free-traders such as Reps. **Norm Dicks**, D-Wash., **William Jefferson**, D-La., and James Moran, D-Va., also pitched in to round up Democratic votes.

So, too, did the chairmen of the committees with jurisdiction over the legislation, Senate leaders, and Bush administration officials -- and all of their top staffers. During the run-up to the CAFTA vote, Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez, Agriculture Secretary **Mike Johanns**, former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, and his successor, former Rep. **Rob Portman**, R-Ohio, lobbied members directly.

These *ad hoc* coalitions help the whip team develop strategy, identify members whose votes are in play, and then work on winning those members' votes. Coalition members have their own target list, which they share with the whip team. But Blunt's office said that the whip staff never gives the coalition its official whip count.

Lobbyists also may enlist their clients to prevail upon lawmakers if a company or industry group has a large presence in a wavering representative's district.

-- Lisa Caruso