

The Revolving Door

Corporate America and Your Government

The revolving door is Washington's most durable corruption mechanism — and its most bipartisan one. It works like this: public officials regulate an industry, then leave government to work for that industry. Or they come from an industry, join the agency that regulates it, serve the industry's interests from within, then return to a higher-paying private sector job. Around and around it goes.

How the Door Spins

The path is usually one of three routes:

Government → Industry Lobbyist

The most common. A member of Congress or senior official leaves government and registers as a lobbyist. Former members are prohibited from lobbying their former colleagues for one or two years — the 'cooling off' period. Many simply wait it out, or work as 'strategic advisors' who technically don't lobby but do everything adjacent to it.

Industry → Regulatory Agency

A corporate executive becomes the head of the agency that regulates their former industry. This is called 'regulatory capture.' The agency's mission shifts from regulating the industry to serving it. Enforcement drops. Fines decrease. Rules are weakened.

Congressional Staff → Lobbying Firm

Staff members who draft legislation often know the rules better than the members themselves. Lobbying firms pay premium prices to hire them. They use that knowledge to find loopholes in the very legislation they helped write.

The Most Famous Examples

Government Sachs

Goldman Sachs executives have moved into and out of Treasury, the Federal Reserve, and other financial regulatory positions for decades. Robert Rubin, Hank Paulson, Steven Mnuchin — Treasury Secretaries who came from or returned to Wall Street.

The FDA-Pharma Pipeline

Former FDA officials regularly move to pharmaceutical companies. Former pharma executives regularly move to the FDA. The result is an agency that approved more than half of all new drug applications in recent years while industry-funded research has become the norm.

Defense Department → Defense Contractors

The Pentagon-to-Lockheed, Boeing, and Raytheon pipeline is so well established that defense contractors budget for it. Generals and admirals retire and collect consulting fees from the companies whose contracts they approved.

The Tech Revolving Door

As Big Tech has grown into one of the most regulated industries in Washington, the revolving door has spun faster. Former FTC, FCC, and DOJ officials now work for Amazon, Google, Meta, and Apple.

What Would Actually Fix It

- Extend the cooling-off period from 1-2 years to 5 years.
- Ban members of Congress from ever becoming lobbyists.
- Prohibit financial regulators from working in finance after government service.
- Require full public disclosure of all contacts between former officials and their successors.
- Give the Office of Government Ethics independent enforcement power.

The door spins because both parties benefit from letting it spin. Stopping it requires electing people who will lose money by stopping it.