WASHINGTON (Reuters) - During the eight years of the Obama administration, business lobbyists often found the gates to the White House closed tight.
They are open now under President Donald Trump. That is not altogether unexpected as the New York real estate developer did campaign during the 2016 presidential election on a promise to elevate the needs of business, which he argued would fuel economic growth.

What does surprise lobbyists, however, is the sheer number of wins in getting the Trump administration to roll back or delay unfavorable regulations in its first 10 months. And it is occurring despite White House dysfunction and distraction.

The lobbyists say it is a stark departure from the approach of the Obama administration, which had a reputation for aloofness toward business and sought to limit the influence of lobbyists, whom it saw as beholden to special interests. The Trump White House is listening to them, they say. It is returning their phone calls. And it is working to eliminate regulations they view as detrimental to the ability to prosper.

When 15 lobbyists and business leaders recently held talks with Trump administration officials on energy infrastructure and climate change, they were surprised by the officials’ opening question: “Do you have a regulation that we could put on a list to try to eliminate? Is there something that is impeding you from growing?”

In that moment, one of the lobbyists at the meeting knew it was a new era. “That as an opening was not the way the Obama administration approached meetings,” she said.

“It’s night and day,” between the Trump and Obama administrations, said James Thurber, a professor in the public affairs school at American University, who studies lobbying and its effects.

Trump promised to “drain the swamp,” an oath that came with plans to curb lobbying and end a “culture of corruption.” The campaign stump speech line had a populist appeal, but one person’s swamp dweller is another’s job creator.

Some of the 16 lobbyists spanning nine different industries interviewed by Reuters acknowledged that many people view them as part of the problem in Washington, not the solution, and that their growing influence may be seen by those as a negative.

Spending so far this year on lobbyists is on pace to exceed spending in 2016, according to the OpenSecrets website, with $2.43 billion spent over the first nine months compared to $2.38 billion at the same point in 2016.
After taking office in January, Trump quickly made it easier to get into the White House.

He reversed President Barack Obama’s restrictions that sought to keep lobbyists at bay by physically barring many of them from the White House - a rule that critics said did nothing more than move meetings with lobbyists to coffee shops across the street. And Trump has stopped the public disclosure of White House visitors’ logs, so now lobbyists come and go with less concern that their presence at the White House will be scrutinized.

Most lobbyists refused to speak on the record because they did not want to reveal anything about their private discussions with the administration. Lobbyists are also acutely aware that anything they say will be used by critics who think Trump has tilted too much toward corporate interests.

The White House did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this article.

The coal, steel, oil and gas industries are some of the clear winners, with easier access to the Trump administration and more deregulation of their industries, said Stan Veuger, a fellow at the conservative thinktank American Enterprise Institute who studies politics and the economy.

That business has been given more access and even more control of certain regulatory issues is “fair criticism and praise if you want to call it that,” said Veuger.

There are big losers, too. Consumer advocacy and environmental groups warning about the perils of climate change, who enjoyed easy access to the Obama White House, have largely been shut out of a Trump White House that is more skeptical of climate change and believes Obama over-reached with some of his measures to protect consumers.

**SOME WINS**

It was no secret that Trump wanted to greenlight the Dakota Access Pipeline to move oil from North Dakota to Illinois despite the fierce opposition of environmentalists and American Indian tribes whose land was being used. He spoke about it frequently during the campaign. Then Trump gave the energy industry more than they had hoped for.
The American Petroleum Institute, which represents all the large refiners, had asked the administration to speed the permitting process for drilling and building new facilities. When Trump signed his executive order authorizing the pipeline only four days after taking office, he also granted this wish.

A number of business trade groups asked the Trump administration to suspend a rule, created during the Obama years, that would require companies to disclose to the government any communications they have with employees during union disputes. In June, the Trump Labor Department did just that, citing the opposition from business.

Among the other wins for business, the Labor Department delivered on a top priority of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce business lobbying group and Wall Street brokerages when it reversed an Obama-era rule aimed at brokers who recommend inappropriate retirement investments.

The administration also side-stepped the process to repeal regulations by implementing delays and holds on rules.

For instance, in the final months of the Obama administration the Bureau of Land Management created a rule governing methane and waste prevention over the strong objections of groups representing oil and gas companies.

API wrote to Ryan Zinke, Trump’s secretary of the interior, in May asking him to postpone implementation of the rule. The Trump administration announced it would and even cited the lobbyists’ objections as the reason.

Of course, it is not perfect harmony between Trump and business. Dozens of corporate leaders abandoned advisory business councils set up by Trump after he appeared to side with white supremacists following a white nationalist rally in Virginia that resulted in the death of a protester.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has spent the past few weeks ringing alarm bells over Trump’s various positions on the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

And yet, said Neil Bradley, one of the top lobbyists for the chamber, “I have even found in times when we may not see eye to eye with the administration on something, we have cordial, timely discussions that are substantive.”
Reporting by Ginger Gibson; Editing by Damon Darlin and Ross Colvin

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