

JUDICIARY

Panel Blocks Grassroots Disclosure, Approves Lobby Bill

By Mark Wegner

The House Judiciary Committee turned back multiple attempts to add new rules to a lobbying and disclosure package — including a potentially lethal blow to a grassroots disclosure provision — giving final approval Thursday to a leadership-backed bill headed to the floor next week.

By voice vote, the panel rejected a grassroots lobbying disclosure amendment offered by Rep. Martin Meehan,

D-Mass., that would have required disclosure for “paid communications campaigns to influence the general public to lobby Congress.”

Meehan’s amendment would have required firms to disclose when they paid at least \$100,000 in a single quarter to stimulate grassroots lobbying activity. Meehan said his proposal was narrowly tailored to avoid constitutional concerns and said detractors have unfairly used a version stripped from the

Senate’s lobbying bill to mischaracterize his proposal.

“Many different groups are trying to distort what this amendment would and would not do,” he said.

Judiciary ranking member Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said he thought the grassroots requirement would violate the First Amendment, a position backed by a loose coalition of mostly

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conservative groups and ultimately accepted by House Judiciary Chairman Conyers.

“I have been convinced by communications from the American Civil Liberties Union, and even the National Rifle Association and the National Right to Life Committee,” Conyers said.

The Senate rejected a similar provision in January and Conyers opted against adding the measure to his lobby package. National Right to Life Committee legislative director Douglas Johnson stopped short of declaring victory.

“We’re feeling guardedly optimistic, particularly after Chairman Conyers’ speech,” he said.

By a 27-5 vote, the committee also rejected a second Meehan amendment that would bar lobbyists from hosting a party explicitly on behalf of

a member of Congress during a national party convention.

Committee members accepted by voice vote an amendment by Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., that would require lobbyists to disclose donations to so-called 527 groups.

Issa withdrew a second amendment designed to close a loophole in House rules that allows public universities and state and local governments a way to get around gift and travel rules.

Conyers objected that it would be “premature” to make further rules changes while a bipartisan task force, headed by Rep. Michael Capuano, D-Mass., conducts a review of the House ethics enforcement process.

Other committee members withdrew or failed to win approval for amendments, including limitations on spouses working for campaigns, enhanced finan-

cial disclosure and reauthorization of the Office of Government Ethics.

The final version of the bill, approved by voice vote, left much of Conyers’ core measure intact. One notable exception was an amendment offered by Conyers that removed a provision that would have doubled the current one-year lobbying moratorium for former members to two years.

Moving on a separate track, the committee also approved by voice vote a bill by Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., that would require lobbyists to disclose the bundling of contributions.

Although it sparked little controversy in committee, bundling disclosure has encountered stiff resistance and faces an uncertain route to the floor. Democratic leaders are considering attaching the bill to the overall lobbying package.