



Policy Brief | 4 May 2026

Lobbying regulation and reform: current and future directions

Politics and Public Administration Section

Issue

Lobbying is a legitimate act of democratic participation which can support informed and inclusive decision-making, as [described by the OECD in a 2021 report](#). However, the OECD also acknowledged that lobbying may lead to specific interests being favoured over the public interest.

This policy brief outlines proposed international standards for lobbying regulation, investigates how Australia's current federal scheme compares, canvasses developments across other jurisdictions and highlights avenues of reform.

Key points

- International standards on lobbying emphasise the need for broad scope, meaningful public reporting, integrity standards for those involved, independent oversight and enforceable penalties.
- Domestic and international lobbying regimes have advanced further than Australia's federal scheme and may serve as useful models.
- Reform proposals focus on improving lobbying regulation's scope and consistency, with a key focus on interoperability and harmonisation across jurisdictions.

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Context

As Monash University academic [Dr Yee-Fui Ng notes](#), lobbyists may be hired on a client's behalf (third-party lobbyists) but most operate 'in-house' on their employer's behalf (pp. 507, 512). [According to the OECD](#), lobbying entities include businesses, unions, non-governmental organisations and think tanks, among others (p. 39). Direct lobbying can include such entities meeting with government officials, whereas indirect lobbying may involve [mobilising communities to petition government representatives](#) (p. 86). Examples of this include grassroots campaigning, where communities are organised to advocate for an issue, or '[astroturfing](#)', where vested interests manufacture actual or implied community support.

These strategies can vary markedly in their levels of transparency and the resourcing behind them. Consequently, as [Dr Ng highlights](#), regulating lobbying can help (p. 509):

- dissuade corrupt behaviour by government officials
- level the playing field among lobbyists
- support merit-based government decision-making.

International standards for lobbying regulation

The [OECD](#) and [Transparency International](#) have developed international standards for lobbying regulation. These identify key principles and design features which fall into four themes:

- **Scope:** Schemes should capture the range of:
 - lobbying entities
 - influence activities
 - public officials exposed to lobbying.
- **Transparency:** Relevant information about lobbying and related activities should be publicly accessible. This includes:
 - its nature and frequency
 - its intended outcome and impact
 - information about related activities, such as political donations, gifts and benefits.
- **Integrity:** Lobbyists and public officials should adhere to standards of conduct, covering:
 - fairness, honesty and (mis)use of information
 - conflicts of interest management
 - pre- and post-employment restrictions.
- **Oversight and enforcement:** Schemes should:
 - be legislative rather than administrative

- include graduated, enforceable penalties
- have independent oversight.

Australia's current lobbying scheme

Australia's federal lobbying scheme comprises a non-legislated [Lobbying Code of Conduct](#) (the Code) and a publicly accessible [Register of Lobbyists](#) (the Register), both administered by the Attorney-General's Department (AGD). The scheme aims to 'promote trust in the integrity of government processes' and ensure that contact between lobbyists and government representatives is 'conducted in accordance with public expectations of transparency, integrity and honesty' (subsection 3(4)). Using the key principles outlined in the previous section, the Code incorporates the following features:

- **Scope:** Governs interactions between third-party (but not [in-house](#)) lobbyists and government representatives, including:
 - Ministers, Assistant Ministers and their staff
 - public servants (paragraphs 5(1)(a)-(d)).

It does not apply to government backbenchers, non-government parliamentarians or their staff.

- **Transparency:** The Code requires lobbyists to provide for the Register:
 - identifying details
 - any previous roles as government representatives
 - client names (section 7).
- **Integrity:** Lobbyists must be transparent and honest in their engagement with government representatives (section 12). Government representatives:
 - must not knowingly and intentionally be party to unregistered lobbyists' activities (subsection 6(1))
 - must report Code breaches to the AGD Secretary (subsection 6(2))
 - cannot become lobbyists on matters relating to their former role for a specified period after leaving public office (section 11).
- **Oversight and enforcement:** The AGD Secretary may remove lobbyists from the register in specified circumstances, including due to Code breaches (paragraph 14(1)(a)). The Attorney-General has absolute discretion to direct the AGD Secretary to remove lobbyists from the register (subsection 14(3)). The Code does not identify sanctions for breaches; however, it operates in conjunction with the [Code of Conduct for Ministers](#) (subsection 4(1)). This code requires ministers to adhere to the Lobbying Code (paragraph 6.2), where breaches could lead the Prime Minister to require the minister to resign, among other actions (paragraphs 8.1–8.6).

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) published an [initial performance audit of the Register](#) in 2018, and a [subsequent audit on the Code](#) in 2020. In its 2018 audit, the ANAO stated that '[t]he Register does not, on its own, provide transparency into the integrity of the

contact between lobbyists and Government representatives or the matters discussed’ (p. 29). Civil society organisations (such as the [Centre for Public Integrity](#) and the [Human Rights Law Centre](#)), [academics](#) and [media commentators](#) have also criticised the scheme’s narrow scope and lack of accountability mechanisms and independent oversight.

Given these issues, some [federal parliamentarians](#) have called for reforms to the scheme. For example, [Senator David Pocock](#) and [Dr Monique Ryan MP](#) have introduced Bills to legislate a federal lobbying regime. Key elements of the Bills include:

- coverage across third-party and in-house lobbyists, all parliamentarians and their staff
- enforceable penalties
- independent oversight by the National Anti-Corruption Commission.

Another important consideration is lobbyists’ access to Australian Parliament House (APH). In May 2024 a [parliamentary inquiry](#) noted that lobbyists receiving sponsored passes (which provide unescorted access to APH private areas) is a privilege unavailable to ordinary Australians (p. 73). Although the Government has not responded formally to this inquiry, in March 2026 Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [signalled](#) the opportunity for enhanced measures as part of an upcoming review of the [APH Private Area Access Policy](#).

Developments in other jurisdictions

Australian jurisdictions

Australian subnational jurisdictions have been increasingly reforming their lobbying regimes in recent years, with Queensland implementing the most far-reaching developments. Queensland’s lobbying regime is a legislated scheme comprising of a [Register](#) and [Code](#), and has been examined in three independent reviews (published in [2021](#), [2022](#) and [2023](#)). Some of the recommendations and observations from these reports were incorporated into the [2024](#) framework, as outlined below:

- **Scope:** Although the regime only regulates third-party lobbyists ([Integrity Act 2009 \(Qld\)](#), section 47), it extends beyond the Executive to senior Opposition members and certain of their staff (sections 42 and 45).
- **Transparency:** The Register details lobbying activity (including the purpose of lobbying communication) and provides transparency over ministerial diaries. It also requires lobbyists to record contacts with government.
- **Integrity:** Certain former public officials are subject to a two-year cooling off period (sections 59–62). In 2024, additional integrity measures were legislated, including:
 - prohibiting ‘dual hatting’ (where a person is simultaneously a lobbyist and political campaigner), to mitigate conflicts of interest and improper influence risks (section 58).
 - requiring former senior government/Opposition representatives who become lobbyists to report their official dealings in the 2 years before they left office (paragraph 50(2)(b)). This is to help determine the matters in which former officials may have ‘insider’ knowledge.

- mandating initial (and then annual) training for prospective lobbyists as a condition of registration (subsection 53(1)).
- **Oversight and enforcement:** The [Queensland Integrity Commissioner](#) provides independent oversight and provides a penalty for unregistered lobbyists who carry out lobbying activity (paragraph 66O(a)).

Elsewhere, anti-corruption and integrity agencies in [New South Wales](#), [Victoria](#), [Tasmania](#) and [South Australia](#) have proposed lobbying reforms. Proposals include broadening the definition of lobbying; extending reporting on registers to include awards nights, fundraising and networking events; and requiring lobbyists to document contacts with government representatives.

International jurisdictions – Ireland as case-study

Of the many countries that introduced or reformed lobbying regulation in the mid-2010s, Ireland's [Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015](#) has been [reported](#) as a 'gold standard', incorporating the below elements:

- **Scope:** Applies to any entity (subsections 5(1)-(2)) that makes 'relevant communications' to a broad array of public officials (subsection 6(1)). 'Relevant communications' (subsection 5(4)) are defined broadly to include [informal conversations](#), [social media posts](#) and [grassroots lobbying](#).
- **Transparency:** The [Register of Lobbying](#) captures a wide range of information on lobbying activities, including the date it occurred, public officials targeted, the lobbyist's details, the matter discussed and the intended results.
- **Integrity:** For one year after leaving office, certain designated public officials cannot lobby on matters with which they were involved in the previous year. This includes a ban on working or providing services to anyone engaged in lobbying on those matters (section 22).
- **Oversight and enforcement:** The independent [Standards in Public Office Commission](#) investigates breaches of the Act (subsection 19(1)). In 2023 the Act was further [amended](#) to close off loopholes and improve its enforceability. This included introducing sanctions for breaching the cooling off provision (new section 22A), and a graduated sanctions scheme to reflect the severity of contraventions (new subsection 22A(13)).

Future directions

Lobbying is increasingly '[sophisticated, complex and well-funded](#)', presenting difficulties for developing fit-for-purpose regulation (p.73). Compounding this are [emerging issues](#) including foreign influence risks and cumbersome administrative burdens (p. 86).

Australia has sought to address foreign influence risks with the legislated [Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme](#) (FITS). This requires those undertaking prescribed 'influence activities' on behalf of foreign entities to sign up to a [public register](#). However, a [2024 parliamentary committee review](#) found the FITS has 'significant flaws', with a 'very low number of registrations and minimal compliance and enforcement activity' (p. 75).

The Review also noted that individuals and organisations may need to separately register with the FITS and the federal lobbying scheme, potentially creating administrative and regulatory burden (p. 12). Increasing [interoperability between regulatory mechanisms](#) (p. 77) is one proposed way to overcome this burden. For example, the 2024 APH access inquiry recommended [aligning the Lobbying Register and the APH passholder database](#) (p. 54).

Among the states, the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption has [recommended](#) that lobbyists be allowed to provide or use documents filed with other jurisdictions (p. 61), while the [Victorian](#) and [South Australian](#) anti-corruption commissions have called for harmonisation of lobbying regulation. However, such harmonisation could pose challenges, particularly from a [constitutional perspective](#) (p. 5).

Conclusion

Ultimately, regulating lobbying is about fairness; it aims to ensure that no single interest has an outsized influence over government decisions. While earlier approaches predominantly focused on increasing visibility over lobbying activities, transparency is only one of several levers available. More established lobbying frameworks, such as those in Queensland and Ireland, have sought to raise integrity standards across the lobbying sector and provide proportionate consequences for non-compliance. As lobbying practices continue to evolve and broaden, regulatory measures will need to be more responsive.

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