

Roll Call

Street Talk: K Street Is the Target as Progressives Hit Town

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The progressives are coming. And take a guess who their No. 1 enemy is. It's K Street, of course.

A big collection of liberal organizations, led by the Campaign for America's Future, is kicking off the annual America's Future Now Conference today. The topics of the confab range from Wall Street reform to health care policy, climate change to economic proposals.

But the undercurrent of the three-day session is deep opposition to the corporate-backed lobbyists, the big-business advocates whom progressives view as having way too firm of a hold on Congress and the entire government.

A year and a half after President Barack Obama moved into the White House and Democrats made gains on Capitol Hill, progressive leaders say the lobbyists have stood in the way of the sweeping changes they envisioned. Sure, the health care law passed, but not in the form they wanted.

"We came in with a mandate for reform," said Bob Borosage, co-director of Campaign for America's Future and a chief organizer of this week's conference. "This has been a brutal process. It's less the Republican minority than it was the entrenched corporate lobbies. Congress and the White House have been able to do some significant things, but it has been a really hard time because of the power of those entrenched lobbies in both parties."

Training Ground

The next stage for the progressive movement is to mobilize citizens to counter that K Street influence, and the conference will serve as a training session of sorts on how best to do that. The fact that this is an election year is not lost on Borosage and his allies.

"Progressives have to organize to hold legislators accountable," he said. The challenge that progressive groups and labor unions have mounted in Arkansas against moderate Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D) is just the beginning.

Borosage explains it this way: "If you're going to stand in the way of the reform agenda and represent your donors rather than your constituents, then you're going to face challenges."

At the conference, the progressive troops will hear a rallying cry from Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Rep. Donna Edwards (D-Md.) that will include a call for legislation to blunt the Supreme Court's decision this year in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, a ruling that opens the door for more corporate and union spending on political advertising.

Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen, is working to counter the *Citizens United* decision and is looking for supporters at the conference.

"These gatherings are about sharing information and perspectives and trading ideas and trying to build

campaigns," Weissman explained. "We think that the decision in Citizens United is going to fundamentally shape for the worst American politics for the foreseeable future. And all progressives, and really anyone who cares about corporate dominance on the policy process, needs to come together to ultimately overturn the decision."

The health care bill and the Wall Street bill, for example, could be and should be stronger, Weissman said, but for K Street. "We need to build up the citizen power to make its effect felt on Capitol Hill and in the executive agencies," he said.

Toxic Influence

Weissman's group supports taxpayer-funded elections, but absent that, Borosage said progressives are trying to figure out ways to make corporate money toxic.

"So if the corporations in fact open the floodgates, we want to be in a position to expose the independent expenditures and out who's behind them and use that to discredit the candidates," Borosage said.

Karen Nussbaum, executive director of Working America, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO that reaches out to people who are not in unions, said the conference is not about framing the issues in order to win elections.

"The issues are not in the service of elections," she said. "Elections are about holding your representatives accountable on the issues. We work on elections so that our elected representatives deliver on the issues. Elections are a strategy to win on the issues."

Working America and other union entities have taken on Lincoln in Arkansas and are supporting her primary opponent Bill Halter (D). "We've been organizing in Arkansas for a year," said Nussbaum, who will participate in a panel called "Working Class Anger: Does It Go Right or Left?" at the conference. "We were in Arkansas because Blanche Lincoln was buckling on the issues we cared the most about."

Nussbaum wants to press the case at the conference that working-class moderate voters are not beyond the reach of progressives.

"You cannot win elections without working-class moderates," she said. "So they're essential to us."

Despite the conservative tea party movement's wooing of many of these voters, Nussbaum said progressives shouldn't use that as an excuse to give up.

"People come together in a right and left around anger at Wall Street, at things being out of their control," Nussbaum said.

Heather Booth, director of Americans for Financial Reform, said the financial crisis has been a tipping point for many Americans to support the Wall Street bill, which she says is at a crucial stage as House and Senate negotiators work out their differences.

"If we organize, we can hold the biggest banks accountable as well as the predatory lenders, to make sure that Main Street's voice and interests are heard — not just the paid lobbyists," she said.

Booth added: "In the financial industry, there are over 1,700 paid lobbyists. We hope the people who come to the conference will take action."