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LOBBYING LANDSCAPE IN SWITZERLAND

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Based on Swissinfo.ch (Original Text has been edited)

Switzerland has one of the most highly-developed systems of democracy in the world. But the influence of lobby groups on political life is hardly regulated

The Swiss parliament is made up of two chambers: the House of Representatives with 200 seats, and the Senate representing the cantons, with 46 seats. Generally, they meet only four times a year, in regular sessions of three weeks. Switzerland has a part-time parliament, since members usually hold down regular jobs besides their political activity. Many parliamentarians are involved in private industry: they support the interests of companies they work for, sit on corporate boards or are entrepreneurs. However, a certain number also work for unions or other associations, providing a counterweight to business interests. Members of both houses have been required for some years now to report their outside activities to the federal chancellery, but there are no systematic checks.

The economic might of lobbies is on show regularly in the Swiss parliament. Whenever the two houses are required to make decisions on matters regarding banks, insurance companies, health insurers, the energy sector or agribusiness, representatives of those interest groups take turns at the microphone to make their pitch.

Lobbies including business lobbies play a vital role in the consensus-based Swiss democratic system. Before being put to a vote in parliament, every major bill is subject to a consultation process, in which all interested parties are supposed to have their say. When a piece of legislation is being developed, an attempt is made to hear from all the parties involved and to take into account all the interests at stake.

So far almost all attempts coming mainly from the Left to regulate and control lobbying have failed. Parliamentarians have only in the past few years been required to declare their interests in companies, industry umbrella groups, associations and other groups. But both chambers of parliament have rejected calls for

transparency on parliamentarians' income and party funding. The prevailing view is that honesty is the rule and there is no need for background checks on individuals or party activities.

The influence of lobbies in the Swiss political system is particularly evident in the field of health insurance. Almost all members of the health committees in both chambers are linked to health insurers, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, medical associations or patient groups.

The divergent interests represented in parliament have blocked reform of the health insurance system for years, while health insurance premiums go up annually. The influence of lobbies has also bogged down legislation on cartels and parallel imports, whereas parliamentarians have been fairly quick to respond to demands from banks, insurers and pension funds. Apart from campaigning for legislation favourable to their interests and avoiding adverse legislation, lobbies seek to influence parliament to get grants and tax breaks for their constituencies.

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