

Trump's Florida Fundraiser Flourishes as New Washington Lobbyist

By Bill Allison | March 5, 2018 4:00AM ET

A stranger to Washington has emerged as a winner in the ruthless world of lobbying in the nation's capital, thanks in part to his ties to President Donald Trump.

Brian Ballard, the Florida fundraiser often sought out by Republican presidential candidates, was best known in Tallahassee until election night 2016. When the state was called for Trump, Ballard's cellphone lit up with clients looking for a guide into the new administration.



Photographer: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg
Brian Ballard

Disclosures now show just how lucrative those services can be: by the end of 2017, Ballard Partners LP had racked up \$9.8 million in federal lobbying fees, the most of any new K Street arrival in the two decades such records have been available.

Trump's surprising victory and Ballard's relationship with him proved pivotal as clients looked for someone who knew the outsider in the White House. Ballard first met Trump in the 1980s and had represented the real estate developer in Florida since 2013. After opening his Washington office, Ballard scored major clients, including American Airlines Group Inc. and Prudential Financial Inc., disclosures with the Senate Office of Public Records show.

'Drain the Swamp'

The firm's success is emblematic of a lobbying boom that belies Trump's vow to "Drain the Swamp." With companies looking to exploit a one-party government that has promised to be more business-friendly, overall spending on lobbyists increased to \$3.34 billion in 2017 from \$3.15 billion, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The number of active individual lobbyists increased for the first time since 2007.

Ballard Partners' first year widely outpaced that of firms established by former senators, top White House aides and cabinet members. The second-most lucrative performance by a rookie firm was in 2008, when former Senators John Breaux, a Louisiana Democrat, and Trent Lott, a Mississippi Republican, took in \$8.1 million in their first year running the Breaux-Lott Leadership Group.

Ballard, 55, has become a major player inside the Beltway with a top-notch client list even as Washington pillars such as Tony Podesta have vanished overnight and others with ties to Trump, like former Corey Lewandowski partner Barry Bennett, have had much less success, at least as measured by lobbying disclosures.

"He's very bright, he's very hardworking, he can be as charming as anyone might want and as ruthless as anyone might fear," said Mac Stipanovich, who was running Bob Martinez's 1986 gubernatorial campaign when he first met Ballard. Ballard's success has followed "the same pattern that made him a top lobbyist in Tallahassee, except on steroids," Stipanovich said.

Top 30

While Ballard's firm wasn't the biggest earner last year-- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP brought in the most, with \$38.7 million in lobbying fees -- Ballard Partners ranked in the top 30. It had a more lucrative debut than the Breaux-Lott Leadership Group and another bipartisan power couple: Jack Quinn, President Bill Clinton's White House counsel, and longtime Republican strategist Ed Gillespie started Quinn Gillespie & Associates in 2000, when it earned \$7.5 million in fees, a Bloomberg analysis of lobby disclosure records found.

Ballard's breakthrough came on election night in November 2016. He was watching the returns come in New York, where he has an apartment. When Florida was called for Trump just before 11 p.m., one client after another called to ask him for help.

“They didn’t have someone that was, not necessarily close, but could kind of speak the language,” he said. In the days that followed, he said, his clients urged him to open an office in Washington.

Foreign Clients

He already represented companies including [Amazon.com Inc.](#), Reynolds American subsidiary RAI Services Co., and Uber Technologies, Inc. Since the move to Washington, he also has picked up foreign clients -- a rarity for a rookie lobbying firm. The firm earned \$1.8 million in 2017 by representing the governments of Turkey, the Dominican Republic and Kosovo, according to records filed with the Justice Department.

Ballard entered the lobbying business after serving as the last chief of staff to Martinez, whose term as Florida’s governor ended in 1991. State records show he registered to lobby for 191 clients in 2016.

He no longer lobbies for the Trump Organization, which Florida disclosure reports show he represented from 2013 to 2016. But he’s more than made up for that since coming to Washington.

Never ‘Never Trump’

While Ballard wasn’t one of the earliest Trump supporters, he wasn’t against him either. He initially backed former Florida Governor Jeb Bush in the 2016 primaries, then switched to Senator [Marco Rubio](#), but was never "never Trump," he said. Ballard recommended a partner in his Florida firm to manage Trump’s state primary campaign and agreed to lead Trump’s fundraising operation in Florida after he secured the nomination.

Because Trump’s campaign for the nomination had been largely self-financed, Ballard had to set up Florida’s fundraising operation for the general election from scratch, a task complicated by the bruising primaries and the decision by many Bush and Rubio loyalists to sit out the race.

After the election, Ballard served as vice chairman of Trump’s inaugural committee, which raised a record \$106.7 million, before opening his Washington office. In April, he was named to the Republican National Committee’s finance team.

He carefully picked Washington veterans for his new shop, including former House staffer Dan McFaul, who had managed a pair of congressional campaigns for MSNBC host and Trump nemesis [Joe Scarborough](#).

Washington Insiders

McFaul, former chief of staff for Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida, worked on the appointments team for the transition, recruiting and vetting officials for Defense, Veterans Affairs and the intelligence services. Ballard also hired Rebecca Benn, who had worked for Senator [Thad Cochran](#) of Mississippi, and Sylvester Lukis, who'd been a Washington lobbyist before running Ballard Partners' Miami office. Ballard also brought Susie Wiles, whom he'd detailed as senior strategist to Trump's Florida campaign team, to Washington.

Former Democratic Congressman [Robert Wexler](#) serves as a consultant as does Otto Reich, a diplomat and senior official in the last three Republican administrations. Both work for the firm's foreign clients. Ballard is also bringing on Jamie Rubin, who was spokesman for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in the Clinton administration, to lobby his old department.

"Tony Podesta didn't stop meeting people when he started his firm," said James Madison University political scientist Tim LaPira, referring to the Democratic insider who co-founded one of the go-to lobbying firms. "Ballard will expand his Washington network well beyond Trump."

White House Lobbying

Ballard doesn't discuss individual clients or what he does for them, but the White House is listed as a focus of its lobbying on 194 of the firm's disclosure reports. That's more than any other entity and almost twice as many times as the House of Representatives. Stipanovich, the Tallahassee lobbyist, says Ballard's White House ties have been key to his success, but could also pose a threat.

Clients don't like scandals, said Stipanovich. "If there were just some kind of ungodly political disaster that befell Trump and all his toadies," he said, "that stink could spill over on Brian."

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