

Chapter 4: Avoiding the Quicksand – A Path for U.S. AI Leadership

The Risk of Regulatory Quicksand and Lobbying Influence

Regulating AI is a delicate balancing act. An overzealous or slow-moving regulatory approach can become a **quicksand** that traps progress and diverts the U.S. from its primary mission of leading in AI – especially for national security. The reality is that enacting new tech policies in Washington tends to be a **long, grinding process**, heavily influenced by industry lobbying and political cycles. Consider the sheer scale of resources big tech firms devote to shaping policy:

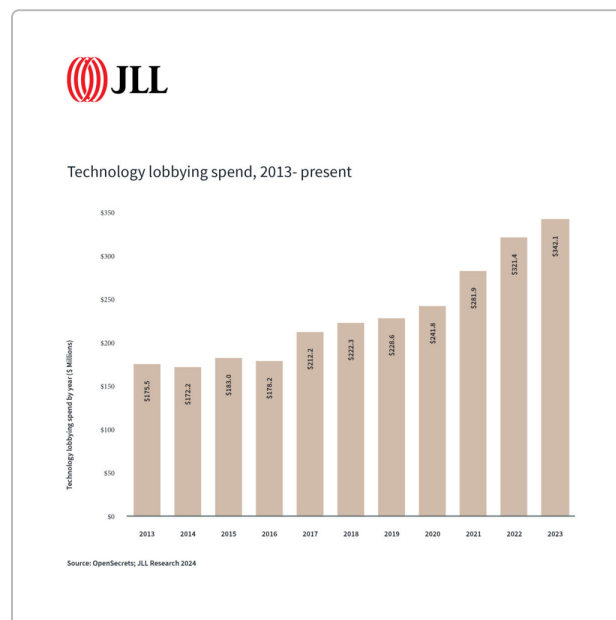


Figure: Technology lobbying spending by year (2013–2023). Lobbying by tech companies hit \$342.1 million in 2023, up nearly 40% since 2020 ¹.

That figure is “**an incredible amount of money**” spent to influence lawmakers, as one DC policy expert noted ¹. In fact, recent analysis found that the **tech sector is now the top-spending industry** in federal lobbying, even outpacing traditionally dominant industries like pharmaceuticals ². This flood of lobbying dollars undeniably slows down the regulatory process – **and that may be exactly the intent**. While Congress debates and studies AI, tech companies are pouring resources into ensuring any eventual rules are favorable or at least not too restrictive. It’s telling that, as of late 2023, **Congress had yet to pass any AI-specific legislation** despite the flurry of hearings and proposals ³. The likelihood of swift action before the next election is low. Washington insiders recognize that in an election season, major controversial legislation is often put on hold – lawmakers will be **campaigning instead of risking bold new laws** that

could alienate donors or voters. In short, the combination of heavy lobbying and political caution means **meaningful AI policy could easily be delayed until well after the 2026 midterms**, if not longer.

The “**shock and awe**” of big tech’s lobbying might be best illustrated by looking at individual players. America’s largest tech companies each spend fortunes to influence policy. For example, in 2023 alone:

- **Amazon** spent about **\$20 million** on federal lobbying ⁴ .
- **Meta** (Facebook) spent roughly **\$19.3 million** ⁵ .
- **Alphabet** (Google’s parent) spent around **\$14.5 million** ⁶ .
- **Oracle** spent **\$13.4 million** ⁷ .
- **Microsoft** spent about **\$10.5 million** ⁸ .
- **Apple** spent nearly **\$9.9 million** ⁹ .
- **ByteDance** (TikTok’s owner) spent approximately **\$8.7 million** – a record for them ¹⁰ .
- Other AI-focused firms like **IBM** and **Palantir** each spent on the order of **\$5 million** in 2023 lobbying ¹¹ ¹² .

To put this in perspective, **four of the biggest tech companies each spent over \$10 million** last year influencing U.S. lawmakers ¹³ . The **tech industry’s lobbying machine is now as large as any in Washington**, even rivaling Big Pharma’s legendary influence. (For comparison, the entire U.S. pharmaceutical and health products industry – historically the #1 lobbying spender – hit a record \$387 million in 2024 ¹⁴ , only marginally above what “Big Tech” spent in 2023.) The **net effect** of all this influence is that robust AI regulations will **face an uphill battle**. Even well-intentioned bills can be delayed, defanged, or derailed through savvy lobbying. As one Bloomberg analysis noted, total federal lobbying hit an all-time high of **\$4.27 billion in 2023**, and tax and AI policy issues were among the drivers of that surge ¹⁵ . *In other words, the more urgently an area cries out for rules (like AI does), the more money pours in to shape those rules or stall them.*

Given this landscape, it’s easy to see how the U.S. could get **mired in endless debates and half-measures** – the regulatory quicksand we must avoid. If America spends years tangled up in hearings, partisan fights, and lobbying tug-of-war over AI categories and rules, we risk losing our edge. **Meanwhile, our rivals are not waiting**. While Washington inches along, nations like China continue pressing forward with AI development (often under far more flexible or opaque governance), and the EU is moving ahead with its AI Act (albeit a very different, more restrictive regime). The U.S. cannot afford paralysis.

Paving a New Road – and Leaving Others Behind

How, then, can the United States cut through the muck and assert global leadership? The answer may be to **do what no one else is doing**. In this chapter, we have introduced the idea of a “**category-based**” **approach** – a unique U.S. strategy to classify and govern AI that aligns with our national interests. Adopting a bold new framework, rather than emulating others, could let America set the terms of the AI era. Since *no other country is currently pursuing such a category-driven AI governance model*, this could become a distinct strategic advantage. Think of it this way: if the U.S. defines a novel path for AI development and deployment – one that emphasizes our strengths like innovation and national security considerations – **others will be forced to play catch-up on our terms**. We create the categories, we set the standards, and competitors must react to *our* agenda, not the other way around. This proactive stance is how the U.S. can reclaim the initiative.

Importantly, forging our own road helps avoid the traps that have stalled others. The European Union, for instance, has spent years negotiating its AI Act, a comprehensive risk-tiered regulation. While well-intentioned, that process has been slow and fraught with disagreement – and it may **burden European AI firms** just as much as it reins in the tech giants. In contrast, the U.S. can choose a path that **encourages innovation** (especially in areas vital to national security) while **targeting the genuinely unacceptable risks**. By categorizing AI efforts in a smart way, we focus regulatory energy where it's truly needed and **clear the road for everything else** to move fast. This agility is something no rival bureaucracy currently matches.

Moreover, a U.S. category-based framework could be iteratively updated as the technology evolves, rather than waiting for international consensus. It would signal to domestic industry and global partners that **America intends to lead** – not by copying Europe's precaution or China's control, but by charting a third course that reflects American values of freedom, security, and enterprise. Such clarity can accelerate investment at home (companies will know what the rules of the road are) and attract allies abroad (who may prefer U.S. standards over competing models). In short, **if we go down this new “paved road” instead of getting stuck in the mud, we set the pace for everyone else**. Allies can follow our lead, and adversaries will scramble to adjust, all the while expending effort to match *our* advancements.

Of course, executing this strategy requires focus and political will. The lobbying numbers cited above show that **not everyone will cheer** a bold new approach – especially if it threatens entrenched interests or imposes new accountability on industry. But leadership has never been about making everyone comfortable. It's about **making tough choices and moving forward** decisively. The United States has done this before in other domains (from aerospace to the internet) by setting ambitious goals and letting the world catch up. We can do it again in AI.

In summary, **the U.S. can avoid the policy quicksand by refusing to step in it**. Rather than slogging down the same path as others, we blaze a new trail. By adopting a category-based AI framework that no one else has yet attempted, we leverage our innovative spirit and strategic focus to maintain global AI leadership. The heavy lobbying and inevitable political headwinds are reminders that time is of the essence – we must move *now*, with purpose, before we're drawn into the mire of status quo thinking. If we succeed, America will not only stay ahead in the AI race; it will define the terms of competition. In the next chapter, we will zoom in from this national view to the local level, exploring how these big ideas translate to on-the-ground action (foreshadowing how even places like **Kuna, Idaho** can be part of the story). For now, the imperative is clear: **don't get stuck – set the pace**. The world will be watching, and following, the course we chart.

Sources:

- Kaela Roeder, *Tech companies spent over \$342M on lobbying while laying down stakes in DC*, Technical.ly (May 23, 2024) [1](#) [2](#) .
- OpenSecrets data on 2023 lobbying expenditures (Amazon \$19.99M; Meta \$19.3M; Alphabet \$14.45M; Oracle \$13.37M; Microsoft \$10.54M; Apple \$9.86M; ByteDance \$8.74M; IBM \$5.67M; Palantir \$5.09M) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) .
- Will Henshall, *There's an AI Lobbying Frenzy in Washington. Big Tech Is Dominating*, TIME (Apr. 30, 2024) [13](#) [3](#) .
- **Investopedia** – Which Industries Spend the Most on Lobbying (Pharma \$6.36B since 1998; \$387M in 2024) [14](#) [16](#) .

- Bloomberg Government analysis via Holland & Knight, *Lobbying Spending Hits New Record with Tax, AI Issues Looming* (2024) ¹⁵ .
- The Korea Times, *Samsung, Hyundai, Hanwha expand lobbying in US* (May 12, 2024) – Samsung's record \$6.3M U.S. lobbying in 2023 ¹⁷ .

¹ ² Tech companies spent \$342.1M on lobbying in 2023

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³ ¹³ Tech Giants Are Vastly Outspending Newcomers on AI Lobbying | TIME

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⁴ Amazon.com Lobbying Profile • OpenSecrets

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⁵ Meta Lobbying Profile • OpenSecrets

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⁶ Client Profile: Alphabet Inc - Lobbying - OpenSecrets

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⁷ Oracle Corp Lobbying Profile • OpenSecrets

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⁸ Microsoft Corp Lobbyists - Lobbying - OpenSecrets

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⁹ Client Profile: Apple Inc - Lobbying - OpenSecrets

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¹⁰ This is how much ByteDance and Shein spent on US lobbying in 2023

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¹¹ Client Profile: IBM Corp - Lobbying - OpenSecrets

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¹² Palantir Technologies Profile: Summary - OpenSecrets

<https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/palantir-technologies/summary?id=D000055177>

¹⁴ ¹⁶ Which Industry Spends the Most on Lobbying?

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¹⁵ Lobbying Spending Hits New Record With Tax, AI Issues Looming

<https://news.bgov.com/bloomberg-government-news/lobbying-spending-hits-new-record-with-tax-ai-issues-loomng>

¹⁷ Samsung, Hyundai Motor, Hanwha expand lobbying in US amid Trump risk - The Korea Times

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