

BREAKING NEWS! MI LEGISLATORS' CONSTITUENTS DONATE TO THOSE LEGISLATORS!

CBS has what it thinks is a big (!) scoop (!) about the bailout today: that Carl Levin and John Dingell and Joe Knollenberg (who has less than a month to cast a vote on any auto bridge loans) have received donations from people associated with the auto industry.

Wow. Michigan's citizens had the audacity to donate money to their members of Congress.

And people tied to the auto industry gave another \$15 million in campaign contributions, **CBS News investigative correspondent Sharyl Attkisson** reports.

[snip]

Take Sen. Carl Levin, who received \$438,304 from the automotive industry. And in the House, Rep. Joe Knollenberg received \$879,327. Rep. John Dingell got nearly a million from the industry. All have enjoyed generous support from the auto industry over their careers, with GM and Ford as their two top contributors. All support a bailout.

That's a scandal of epic proportions.

Note, Attkisson does admit that this is to be expected—that Michigan's residents and industries might donate to their legislators.

It's not surprising that a lot of that money went to members of Congress from Michigan, where the auto industry is the biggest employer and politicians are passionate advocates for their

■ constituents.

And she does focus on John Dingell's extensive personal ties, through his wife Debbie, to GM. (I wonder if she was similarly scandalized when Bill Frist worked on healthcare issues? Or Dianne Feinstein worked on any of the issues that pertained to her husband's business interests? Or any of the other legislators with similar family ties to industry? Or John Tester's or John Salazar's ties to agriculture?)

But her reporting on automotive donations to Knollenberg, Dingell, and Levin is laughable. That's true, first of all, because she provides figures for lobbying **in the last year** (\$50 million) yet then provides "**lifetime**" political donations, without advising her readers that she has changed her time frame. When you're talking about the lifetime donations of Dingell (53 years in the House), Knollenberg (15 years in the House), and Levin (29 years in the Senate), you might want to make clear that you're talking lifetime, not just one year or one political cycle. (Actually, she's talking about "lifetime" donations as far back as OpenSecrets database goes back—that is, to 1989.) So you are supposed to be shocked (!) that Carl Levin has received almost half a million from the biggest employers in his state in the last nineteen years (for an average of less than \$25,000 a year); and that Dingell has received a million from the biggest employers in his state in the last nineteen years (for less than \$51,000 a year).

Shocked yet?

And note, more than half the donations, to both men, came from individuals—that is, from their constituents. I thought it was supposed to be a good thing that politicians got donations from their actual constituents?

Predictably, she seems to have no interest in the automotive donations to those on the other side of this issue. Why doesn't she think that Bob Corker's donations from the auto

industry—\$234,000 in just 2 years of service in the Senate—are as worthy of note as Levin's \$438,000 over almost 19 years? John Dingell, he of the "million dollars" from the auto industry—got \$110,100 in the last two years, whereas Corker got \$189,260 in the same period. Why aren't Corker's relatively larger donations from the auto industry worthy of note? Is it because Bob Corker's on the other side of this issue that his donations don't get examined? Or because she's simply unaware that Michigan is not the only automotive-heavy state? (FWIW, Richard Shelby doesn't get any significant automotive donations.)

Now, I don't mean to diminish the importance of donations (though auto donations to Levin and Dingell were, in perspective, almost laughably small). I just want to point out that the same simplified understanding of the industry pervades reporting on money and political influence just as it does the rest of this discussion. And, for that matter, the same double standard that finds influence from one industry terrible but not from other industries, like finance.

And, not surprisingly, this is true of the larger story about lobbying money. Yes, the "auto industry" spent close to \$50 million last year—but that includes a lot of money from foreign manufacturers (including \$4.1 million from Toyota), companies that support a bailout but aren't asking for the money directly. Which of course makes the title of this piece: "Big Three Spending Millions on Lobbying" totally misleading (though true—it's millions, but not the \$50 million that Attkisson's sloppy reporting suggests).

Scrutiny of this stuff is important. But if it starts from a position that is downright ignorant about the industry, it doesn't really tell us much.