

How Top White House Adviser Anita Dunn Is Dodging Ethics Disclosure

The senior Biden strategist has worked with a host of corporate clients at the influential firm SKDK, but a loophole is keeping possible conflicts of interest out of the public eye.

-Lee Fang,
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President Joe Biden's [promise](#) to reverse the revolving door of lobbying and usher in a new, transparent administration hasn't extended to one of his closest advisers.

Thanks to an ethics loophole, Anita Dunn, a member of the president's inner circle, does not have to file the public financial disclosure required of every other presidential appointee.

Dunn, an influential figure in Democratic politics, became the de facto campaign manager for Biden after his dismal showing last year in the Iowa Democratic caucus. Dunn and SKDK, formerly SKDKnickerbocker, a corporate and political consulting firm she co-founded, helped steer the Biden campaign to victory.

After initially claiming that she would return to SKDK after the campaign, Dunn changed course and became a senior adviser to Biden, one of the most coveted roles in the White House. The role, she told reporters, would only last until summer, at which point she will return to SKDK.

The temporary status allows Dunn to skirt traditional ethics disclosures, which require government officials to make public previous consulting clients, investments, debts, and other potential conflicts of interest. Instead, she was hired into a special, temporary role that keeps her disclosure — and, therefore, her client list at SKDK and any conflicts of interest — out of the public eye.

SKDK's corporate client list is largely secret. In New York, the firm releases a partial client list through state-level lobbying disclosure filings, showing work on behalf of casino company Genting New York LLC, NRG Energy, and the Greater New York Hospital Association. But many of the firm's clients, including firms advised by Dunn, are undisclosed.

SKDK reportedly works with companies with a major stake in decisions made by the Biden administration, including Pfizer, which is currently engaged in a high-stakes lobbying campaign to oppose the creation of generic coronavirus vaccines and other price-cutting measures. Its recent clients also include Microsoft, IBM, Ford, and Comcast — major corporations with a stake in Biden policies.



“Because Ms. Dunn is a special government employee, she is required to file an OGE 450 which is a confidential financial disclosure form,” wrote an official for the White House ethics office in an email to The Intercept. “Confidential financial disclosure forms are not made available to the public. Ms. Dunn is not required to file a public financial disclosure form and accordingly, we do not have any documents responsive to your original request.”

Other senior White House officials, including Eric Lander, Biden’s top scientific adviser, have been forced to [recuse](#) themselves from vaccine-related decisions given conflicts of interest. The White House has not responded to questions over whether Dunn faces any similar recusals.

The position occupied by Dunn is known for its history of pivotal White House advisers. Karl Rove was the senior adviser to President George W. Bush. David Axelrod served in the same

position for President Barack Obama. Jared Kushner and Stephen Miller were senior advisers for President Donald Trump.

But all four of them, by contrast — [Rove](#), [Axelrod](#), [Kushner](#), and [Miller](#) — filed publicly available disclosures. Mike Donilon, a second senior adviser to Biden, [disclosed](#) his personal ethics statement. **Dunn will not.**

Unlike the other senior advisers, Dunn joined the administration as a special government employee, a designation often taken by scientists and other experts that join part-time boards. SGEs, as they are known, work for the government for no longer than 130 days during a 365-day period. Crucially, SGE officials face more lenient disclosure requirements and must only file the OGE 450 listing potential conflicts.

“Regardless of Dunn’s role as a presidential adviser and SGE, she is subject to the conflict of interest code.”

“It would appear that Anita Dunn is in a key advisory role to the president, and if her service may reasonably be expected to exceed 60 days, she should be subject to the public disclosure requirements,” said Craig Holman, an expert on lobbying and ethics with Public Citizen.

“Furthermore,” added Holman, “regardless of Dunn’s role as a presidential adviser and SGE, she is subject to the conflict of interest code. It appears Dunn may hold an assortment of conflicting properties, and thus it is all the more important that she publicly disclose her financial reports so that any conflicts can be monitored and managed appropriately.”

An official from the White House declined to comment further. Dunn is expected to leave the White House to return to SKDK fairly soon — presumably before May 29, the 130-day threshold since joining the administration.

Over the course of Dunn’s career in politics, which goes back to her time as an intern for President Jimmy Carter, she has advised dozens of Democratic candidates, including presidential campaigns and congressional runs, as well as elected officials such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and former Sen. Tom Daschle. In 2008, she played a senior role shaping Obama’s communications and policy strategy and worked briefly as his White House communications director.

And throughout her time working with Democratic Party leaders, Dunn built a powerhouse consulting firm that has worked to craft the image and lobbying priorities of major corporate interests.

In 1993, Dunn joined Democratic consultants Bob Squier and Bill Knapp to form Squier Dunn Knapp, the firm now known as SKDK. The company, as The Intercept has [reported](#), has worked on behalf of business interests to undermine progressive causes.

In 2010, Dunn’s SKDK [mobilized](#) to help processed food companies such as General Mills, Kellogg, and Pepsi defeat guidelines designed by first lady Michelle Obama to discourage

marketing unhealthy foods to children. That year, SKDK also helped for-profit colleges and universities [defeat](#) regulations crafted by the Obama administration to discourage widespread fraud in the industry.

SKDK's corporate client list has brought the firm into many other contentious lobbying battles, including efforts to [slash](#) corporate taxes on profits earned in overseas markets, to [win approval](#) for the Keystone XL pipeline, and a bid last year by New York real estate interests to [defeat](#) new rules to help renters.

Pfizer has been a major client of SKDK.

One of the most pivotal decisions currently under review by White House officials is the question of whether to grant a waiver at the World Trade Organization to allow a temporary suspension of enforcement of intellectual property and patent enforcement for Covid-19 vaccines, which would allow foreign firms to replicate American vaccines at low cost. The initiative is sharply opposed by drug companies, particularly by Pfizer, which has been a [major client](#) of SKDK.

Dunn, in a celebratory post-election [interview](#) with PRWeek, touted the fact that while she crafted campaign strategy, her firm SKDK designed the campaign's vote-by-mail effort in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Arizona.

"[I'll] slowly ease my way back into the agency," she said. "I had not been doing political campaigns. My practice had been focused on advocacy for nonprofits and I did have some private sector clients. I will return to doing work I love; helping people with good causes effect change."

That promise didn't last long. In January, Dunn announced that she would join the administration after all. In an email to colleagues, she wrote that she would be stepping away from SKDK "for client matters but not for overall management issues" while working in the White House. But, she added, there would be careful ethical safeguards, reminding colleagues that "no one at this firm can contact me for help on a client matter while I am inside. Period. No exceptions, no loopholes, no contact."