

POLITICS

Lewandowski's firm quietly inked deal with Venezuela-owned company

Officials with Corey Lewandowski's firm, Avenue Strategies, confirmed that last month it formalized a \$25,000-a-month lobbying contract with Citgo. | Getty

By KENNETH P. VOGEL
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A firm co-founded by Donald Trump's initial campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, quietly agreed to lobby for the oil company Citgo as the company, which is owned by the leftist government of Venezuela, was becoming increasingly embroiled in tensions involving the United States, Venezuela and Russia.

Officials with Lewandowski's firm, Avenue Strategies, confirmed that last month it formalized a \$25,000-a-month lobbying contract with Citgo.

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The officials initially told POLITICO that the firm had filed legally required paperwork revealing the contract to the U.S. government on Feb. 20. But Lewandowski's co-founder in the firm, fellow Trump campaign aide Barry

Bennett, subsequently clarified that it “was just an origination date,” and the firm was working to file the paperwork Wednesday.

As of Wednesday evening, that paperwork was not posted on the website of the Senate Office of Public Records, which processes and automatically posts such filings almost instantaneously.

Bennett said Avenue has yet to begin lobbying for Citgo and that “it’s not entirely clear” on what issues it will lobby. He stressed, though, that he will be the only firm employee who registers to lobby on the contract, and that Lewandowski “doesn’t really have a role” in it.

Sources familiar with the contract say that Avenue Strategies was brought on by Citgo to help provide access to the Trump administration amid calls for the U.S. to seize the company’s assets as a way to expand the impact of sanctions against Venezuela.

But the revelation of Avenue’s previously unreported contract with Citgo comes at an awkward moment for the company, Lewandowski and the Trump White House.

Trump ran on a promise to “drain the swamp” of special interest influence in Washington, and the increasing attention on the lobbying firm co-founded [soon after the election](#) by Lewandowski, who remains a close Trump confidant, threatens to undermine the president’s efforts to make the case he’s fulfilling that promise.

On Wednesday, the government-ethics watchdog group Public Citizen [sent a letter](#) to the Department of Justice and congressional lobbying oversight offices requesting investigations into whether Lewandowski was violating lobbying laws by not registering as a lobbyist, based on a [POLITICO report](#) about a newer company created by Avenue Strategies that appeared to be offering prospective clients meetings with Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

Bennett called the letter a baseless and partisan “witch hunt.”

But Bennett also acknowledged that Avenue Strategies on Wednesday dissolved the newer company, which was called Washington East West Political Strategies.

The company had distributed pitch materials to prospective Eastern European clients promising to arrange meetings with Trump, Pence and senior members of their administration, POLITICO revealed last week. Bennett said he and Lewandowski never saw the document, which he said was produced by Avenue's partners in the company, an Azerbaijani oil executive and an American political consultant who works extensively in Russia.

The document "was a violation of our understanding with them," Bennett said. "We don't need the headache."

Lewandowski issued a statement saying he had "no affiliation or involvement" and "never entered into any agreement with this firm."

Bennett clarified that "Avenue Strategies owned the equity — and that is me and Corey — but he didn't have any role." Bennett didn't respond when asked whether Avenue had dissolved other firms it had created with other partners to prospect in the Middle East, Canada and Central America.

Concerns about Lewandowski's adherence to lobbying rules and boasts of access also have [taken hold inside the White House](#), said two people who have discussed Lewandowski's lobbying with administration officials.

And Citgo, the U.S. refining arm of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, is under increasing scrutiny as the Trump administration [takes a tougher line](#)

against the cash-strapped government of Venezuela, which has been accused of human rights abuses and drug trafficking.

Complicating matters further, there are [rising concerns](#) that the Russian government-owned oil company Rosneft could be on the verge of taking control of Citgo. That's because Venezuela's national oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela, or PDVSA, took out a loan from Rosneft in December, offering as collateral 49.9 percent of Citgo's shares. International energy market analysts have predicted that the economic crisis in Venezuela could lead PDVSA to [default on its debt](#), which would put Rosneft on the cusp of controlling three of the largest and most sophisticated refineries in the U.S., plus three major pipelines and dozens of fuel terminals.

The involvement of Russia is fraught for Trump's administration. The president's team is under scrutiny from law enforcement and congressional investigators examining Russian efforts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election, including by stealing and disseminating emails from allies of Trump's Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

A bipartisan group of senators [wrote a letter last month](#) to Trump's Treasury secretary, Steve Mnuchin, linking the election hacking and Russia's alleged violations of arms control agreements with Rosneft's position in Citgo.

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The senators wrote that they are "extremely concerned that Rosneft's control of a major U.S. energy supplier could pose a grave threat to American energy security, impact the flow and price of gasoline for American consumers, and expose critical U.S. infrastructure to national security threats." They urged Mnuchin — in his capacity as chairman of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, which has to sign off on acquisitions of U.S. assets by foreign companies — to prepare for the prospect that PDVSA might soon default.

"In the event Rosneft were to acquire Citgo, we would expect a thorough, conflict-free and expedient review," the senators' wrote in their letter to Mnuchin.

Bennett had previously vowed that Avenue would not lobby for an entity that was averse to U.S. foreign policy interests — specifically singling out Russia and China — and he said that if Rosneft took control of Citgo, "we would resign immediately. Don't want that hassle."

When asked whether Venezuela was averse to U.S. foreign policy interests, Bennett said “I don’t work for Venezuela. I work for a Houston-based company that has three plants in America and produces 19 percent of America’s gasoline. It’s an American company, Americans work there.”

Citgo spokesmen did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did the White House or Treasury.

Citgo attracted attention last month, when it was revealed in a Federal Election Commission filing that the company donated \$500,000 to [Trump’s inaugural committee](#), despite not having donated to recent presidential inaugurations.

The company has long employed established Washington lobbying firms and lobbyists, including Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck and Cornerstone Government Affairs.

Bennett explained that Avenue’s deal with Citgo was a subcontract with a company called VantageKnight that was started by a veteran lobbyist named Manuel Ortiz, who previously represented Citgo while working at Brownstein.

Ortiz has deep ties on the Democratic side of the aisle, but no obvious connections to Trump’s administration. He did not respond to requests for comment, but sources say he also brought in Avenue Strategies to lobby for the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, which signed Avenue to a [\\$125,000 contract](#) covering the four months from March through June.

VantageKnight was paid \$270,000 during the first three months of the year to lobby for Citgo, according to [filings](#) with congressional oversight offices.

The filings indicate that Ortiz lobbied Congress and the Trump administration on the “potential impact of U.S. energy and foreign policy restrictions” on Citgo’s “operations and valuation of assets,” as well as “sanctions related issues.”

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