



FACT

FOUNDATION FOR
ACCOUNTABILITY
AND CIVIC TRUST

February 24, 2025

The Honorable James Lankford, Chair
The Honorable Christopher Coons, Vice Chair
U.S. Senate Select Committee on Ethics
220 Hart Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (RI)

Dear Senator Lankford and Senator Coons:

The Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust (FACT) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting accountability, ethics, and transparency in government and civic arenas. We request the Senate Select Committee on Ethics investigate Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (RI) to determine whether he violated the Senate ethics rules on conflicts of interest.

FACTS. Senator Whitehouse's wife, Sandra Whitehouse, has worked for the advocacy group Ocean Conservancy since 2008.¹ According to tax filings, Ocean Conservancy had paid Sandra Whitehouse through her consulting firm Ocean Wonks LLC since 2017, and paid her directly prior to that.²

Since 2008, Ocean Conservancy has been awarded nineteen government grants worth approximately \$14.2 million.³ However, nearly half of this \$14 million was given to the group in the fall of 2024 alone—all of which Senator Whitehouse directly voted for.⁴ In September 2024, Ocean Conservancy received a \$5.2 million federal grant from the National Oceanic and

¹ Sandra Whitehouse, LinkedIn, available at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sandra-whitehouse-54099217/>.

² *IRS 2017 Form 990*, Ocean Conservancy (filed Feb. 15, 2019), *IRS 2016 Form 990*, Ocean Conservancy (filed Feb. 15, 2018), available at <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/237245152>.

³ Federal grants awarded to Ocean Conservancy for FY 2008 through FY 2025, USASpending.gov (last accessed Feb. 18, 2025), available at <https://www.usaspending.gov/search/?hash=130aa36be96cc5ed66be37b2808655f1>.

⁴ Federal grants awarded to Ocean Conservancy for FY 2024, USASpending.gov, (last accessed Feb. 18, 2025), available at <https://www.usaspending.gov/search/?hash=c8d96c39f4a7425fe64da2a4776b8259>.

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for marine debris cleanup.⁵ This grant was funded by the Biden Administration’s “Bipartisan Infrastructure Law,” a bill Sheldon Whitehouse supported and voted for.⁶ In December 2024, Ocean Conservancy also received \$1.7 million in federal funding from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to assist with marine debris cleanup.⁷ The grant was funded as part of the EPA’s annual appropriations bill, which Sen. Whitehouse also voted for.⁸

While these two grants alone appear to be a conflict of interest, it is even more egregious in the context of Senator Whitehouse’s long history of working on legislation being lobbied for by organizations tied to his wife. Altogether, Ocean Conservancy has spent millions on federal lobbying expenses over the years on issues relating to oceans, climate change, and environmental cleanup—issues directly championed by Senator Whitehouse, a longtime member (and current Ranking Member) of the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee and the co-founder of the Senate’s so-called “Oceans Caucus.”⁹ For instance, Ocean Conservancy urged Congress to pass the International Maritime Pollution Accountability Act—legislation first introduced by Senator Whitehouse in 2023.¹⁰ Ocean Conservancy also advocated and secured billions in funding for coastal restoration projects in the Inflation Reduction Act.¹¹ Senator Whitehouse not only voted for that legislation, but touted \$3 billion in grant funding for ports and coastal restoration among the “Whitehouse-backed measures in the bill.”¹² In addition to Ocean Conservancy, Sandra Whitehouse has been paid by other organizations that have lobbied the

⁵ *Cooperative Agreement NA24NOSX999C0014*, funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Debris Program (awarded Oct. 1, 2024), available at <https://govtribe.com/award/federal-grant-award/cooperative-agreement-na24nosx999c0014>.

⁶ Press Release, *NOAA to Award Ocean Conservancy \$5.2M to Remove Large Debris from U.S. Coastal Waters*, Ocean Conservancy (Sept. 5, 2024), available at <https://oceanconservancy.org/news/noaa-award-ocean-conservancy-remove-large-debris/>; H.R. 3684, Roll Call Vote #314: Passed 69-30-1, available at https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1171/vote_117_1_00314.htm.

⁷ *Cooperative Agreement 02J90701*, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (awarded Dec. 1, 2024), available at https://www.usaspending.gov/award/ASST_NON_02J90701_6800.

⁸ *H.R. 4366 - Consolidated Appropriations Act 2024* (Became law on Mar. 9, 2024), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/4366/all-actions>; H.R. 4366 Roll Call Vote 118th Congress - 2nd Session: Passed 75-22-3, available at https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1182/vote_118_2_00084.htm.

⁹ See Ocean Conservancy’s lobbying records at OpenSecrets (<https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/clients/summary?cycle=2018&id=D000064969>).

¹⁰ Press Release, *Ocean Conservancy Urges Congress to Pass International Maritime Pollution Accountability Act*, Ocean Conservancy (July 11, 2024), available at <https://oceanconservancy.org/news/statement-ocean-conservancy-urges-congress-to-pass-international-maritime-pollution-accountability-act/>.

¹¹ *2022 Annual Report*, Ocean Conservancy (February, 2023), available at <https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/2022-Annual-Report.pdf>.

¹² Press Release, *Whitehouse Votes for Inflation Reduction Act to Lower Energy and Health Care Costs for Rhode Islanders and Bend Emissions Curve*, Office of Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (August 7, 2022), available at <https://www.whitehouse.senate.gov/news/release/whitehouse-votes-for-inflation-reduction-act-to-lower-energy-and-health-care-costs-for-rhode-islanders-and-bend-emissions-curve/>.

Senate on legislation connected to her husband and received government contracts or federal funds.¹³

LAW. Senators must conduct themselves according to the Senate Ethics Rules, which prohibit Senators from taking official action when they have a conflict of interest. Essentially, the Senate rules broadly prohibit Senators from using any official action to obtain or appear to obtain a financial benefit, whether the benefit is obtained directly by the Senator or their spouse.

Senate Rule 37 states,

“A Member . . . shall not receive any compensation, nor shall he permit any compensation to accrue to his beneficial interest from any source, the receipt or accrual of which would occur by virtue of influence improperly exerted from his position as a Member No Member, officer, or employee shall knowingly use his official position to introduce or aid the progress or passage of legislation, a principal purpose of which is to further only his pecuniary interest, only the pecuniary interest of his immediate family, or only the pecuniary interest of a limited class of persons or enterprises, when he, or his immediate family, or enterprises controlled by them, are members of the affected class.”

Generally, the rules address the fact that a benefit to a Senator’s spouse does directly benefit the Senator, and that a third-party could use a Senator’s spouse to give gifts or obtain influence

The Senate Ethics Manual is clear that a Senator “should never use the prestige or influence of a position in the Senate for personal gain This provision was intended ‘as a broad prohibition against members, officers or employees deriving financial benefit, directly or indirectly, from the use of their official position.’”¹⁴ Even the “appearance” or “possibility” that a Member is “cashing in” or has a “personal financial stake in the outcome of their official duties” is to be avoided.¹⁵

Under the Senate Ethics Manual’s Scope of Authority, the Senate “may discipline a Member for **any misconduct**, including conduct or activity which does not directly relate to official duties, when such conduct unfavorably reflects on the institution as a whole.”¹⁶

¹³ See Josh Christenson, “Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse backed laws to benefit wife’s company and their ‘financial interests’: ethics complaint,” New York Post (March 6, 2024), available at <https://nypost.com/2024/03/06/us-news/sen-sheldon-whitehouse-hit-with-ethics-complaint-for-backing-laws-that-benefited-his-wifes-environmental-group/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Senate Select Comm. on Ethics, *Senate Ethics Manual* at 65-66 (2003 ed.), available at https://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/f2eb14e3-1123-48eb-9334-8c4717102a6e/2003-senate-ethics-manual.pdf (citing S. Rep. No. 95—49, The “Nelson Report”).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 66.

¹⁶ *Senate Ethics Manual*, at 13.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST. Senator Whitehouse directly voted for legislation that recently led to \$6.9 million of taxpayer funds being paid to an organization for which his wife works and receives an income from. This circular relationship appears to be directly contrary to the Senate rules that broadly prohibit Senators from using the power of their office to benefit or appear to benefit themselves or their spouses. As the Ethics Committee has stated: “Senators must closely guard against even the appearance that their families or friends are entitled to use [the Senator’s] resources and power for their own personal gain.”¹⁷ Additionally, even if Senator Whitehouse believes the federal funds are going to a worthy cause, “the fact that a cause is worthy does not negate the duty to ensure compliance with ethical standards.”¹⁸ This is exactly the type of case that citizens view as a conflict of interest and leads to the public’s mistrust in Congress. We request the Senate Ethics Committee conduct a full investigation into Senator Whitehouse’s actions that, at a minimum, have created an appearance of a conflict of interest.

Sincerely,

/s/Kendra Arnold

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¹⁷ U.S. Senate Select Comm. On Ethics, *Public Letter of Admonition to Sen. Robert Menendez*, at 3 (Apr. 26, 2018), available at: https://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/49c12c75-7a26-4fe6-b070-19fcef4d7532/senator-robert-menendez---public-letter-of-admonition.pdf.

¹⁸ *Public Letter of Admonition to Sen. Robert Menendez*, at 3.