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When Rules No Longer Apply

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Republicans in Congress seem strangely eager to let coal companies pollute streams without telling the public, to let oil and gas companies more easily bribe foreign officials, and to let any company win federal contracts no matter how badly it has violated labor laws.

They're well on their way to getting all this done under the Congressional Review Act, a legislative cudgel that has [rarely been used](#) until now. The act lets Congress use fast-track procedures to pass "resolutions of disapproval" that, when signed by the president, nullify federal regulations issued roughly in the last six months of the previous presidential term.

The stream pollution and bribery measures are already on President Trump's desk, and he's expected to sign both within days.

The goal of the Interior Department's "[stream protection rule](#)" was to prohibit mining practices that permanently pollute streams, destroy drinking water sources and threaten forests. It requires coal companies to compile and provide information about contamination, so affected communities could take legal action against polluters under the Clean Water Act. The companies argued, against all evidence, that the rule would cost jobs. What it really would have done is subject them to fines for pollution that harms human health.

The [antibribery rule](#) was called for in the Dodd-Frank Act of 2010 and issued by the Securities and Exchange Commission in June. By requiring companies in extraction industries like oil and gas to disclose payments to foreign governments, it aimed to combat corruption. The American oil industry has said such disclosure would put it at a competitive disadvantage. That's ridiculous. Many other countries have similar rules.

As of Wednesday, the House had sent several other rule-nullifying measures to the Senate. One of the rules it wants to undo requires the oil and gas industry to reduce polluting leaks, flares and ventings of methane — a powerful greenhouse gas — on public and tribal lands; [another](#) makes needed updates to the nation's Resource Management Plans for conserving federal public lands. Yet [another](#) helps to ensure that the names of severely mentally ill people, barred by federal law from buying guns, are included in the national background-check system. Also opposed by the House is [a regulation](#) requiring federal contractors to disclose labor law violations when bidding for government contracts. They say this amounts to blacklisting; it doesn't. It creates a clear process for resolving violations before contracts are awarded.

Dozens of other regulations are vulnerable to this tactic. They include limits on fees on prepaid cards, rules that let states sponsor retirement plans for people who do not have pension coverage at work, chemical facility standards, Arctic drilling safeguards, student-borrower protections and internet privacy protections.

Mr. Trump won the presidency, in part, by promising to hold powerful interests accountable for practices that harm the public. But nullifying final rules — which went through a long, public process on the way to being issued — elevates corporate interests above all others.