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Statement by Common Cause President Chellie Pingree

For nearly 35 years, Common Cause has fought for stronger ethics at all levels of government. We believe it is imperative for citizens to have confidence in the ethical behavior of their elected officials. When people trust the politicians who represent them, they are more likely to trust their government and more likely to participate in democracy.

One of the most serious responsibilities of our elected Members of Congress is to police themselves. But now we are seeing efforts by congressional leaders to establish rules for the incoming Congress that would allow elected officials to avoid public scrutiny of their behavior.

Some of the reported changes are as egregious as narrowing a rule that says a Member's behavior must reflect credibly on the House, to allowing a deadlocked Ethics Committee to dismiss an ethics complaint.

Why would these changes be happening?

Simply put, we believe that the Republican leadership is retaliating against a House Ethics Committee that had three times admonished its House Majority leader, once for strong-armed tactics used to try and persuade a colleague to vote in support of the Medicare bill, once for appearing to link political donations to legislation and once for using a federal agency in a political manner. The Republican leadership appears to be cracking down on a system that got out of its control.

There is no better example than Representative Tom DeLay (R-TX) as to why a leader in the middle of an ethics investigation needs to step down, as Common Cause has called on him to do. Representative DeLay or his allies appear to be involved in changing these rules to protect DeLay by undermining the work of the Ethics Committee.

The message to the American public is unmistakably clear: Congress is more interested in protecting its own than it is in being accountable to the citizens it serves. We can no longer refer to this body as "the People's House" with a straight face as long as it holds itself above public scrutiny on ethics.

Common Cause today calls on all Republicans in the House to vote against these rules changes. We also call on Democrats in the House not only to vote against them, but also to speak out in

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opposition. Members' silence on this vote will make them complicit with those who want to change the rules.