

Congressional Ethics Coalition

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House Still Poised to Cripple Ethics Process

Washington, DC — Last night, the House Republican conference rejected an attempt to gut the chamber's standard of ethical conduct for members. In addition, the conference reversed a recent decision designed to allow Majority Leader Tom DeLay to retain his leadership position in the event he is indicted by a Texas grand jury. We applaud those decisions.

Unfortunately, in the calm after the storm, the House remains poised to take two other steps that would effectively cripple enforcement of ethics rules.

House Republican leaders are reportedly still intent on forcing through a rule that would require a majority vote of the ethics committee before even a preliminary ethics investigation could begin in any matter. Under current rules, if the Committee cannot agree on a course of action on a pending ethics matter for 45 days, a preliminary investigation begins automatically. Because the Committee is evenly divided between five Democrats and five Republicans, that automatic trigger is critical to avoiding partisan deadlock and encouraging bipartisan cooperation on the panel. The end of this “45 day rule” would sharply increase the incentive for partisan, deadlock votes on the committee, and would go a long way toward guaranteeing that most ethics complaints would be dead on arrival.

In addition, the Republican leadership still appears likely to retaliate against Rep. Joel Hefley for his leadership of the ethics committee this past year by removing him as Chairman. Hefley had the courage to garner unanimous support for two admonishments of DeLay for ethical misconduct.

To remove Hefley from his post would send an unmistakable signal that any ethics panel member who votes against a member of his or her own party will be punished by the leadership. Combined with the proposed rule requiring that at least one panel member must vote against a member of their own party to launch an investigation, the House will have effectively stopped ethics enforcement in its tracks.

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