

When I was elected to Congress in 2006, I promised the people of New Hampshire that I would bring my backbone with me to help drain the swamp in Washington and change the way Congress does business. In two short years, we have already seen some real change in how Congress works.

On my first day in office, I voted to separate lobbyists from lawmakers by banning the meals, gifts and travel they used to shower on members of congress. I helped to create an outside ethics panel to investigate alleged wrongdoing and make sure that ethics issues are not swept under the rug. And I worked to reform the earmark process by cutting earmark spending in half and increasing transparency requirements like making lawmakers put their names on earmarks, disclose their requests and certify that they don't have a personal interest in those earmarks.

We have more to do to restore the public's trust. The people must know that Congress is taking the right actions for the right reasons.

Over the last few months, we have seen scandals surrounding campaign contributions and earmarks. Lobbyists from the PMA Group - a major Washington lobbying firm - were allegedly giving campaign contributions to senior lawmakers in exchange for earmarks for their clients. Scandals like these erode the public trust in the House of Representatives. Members of Congress can't ignore them, even if they implicate members of our own parties. We must pursue them aggressively.

Investigation

In February, I was one of 17 Democrats to vote to investigate these ties between campaign contributions and earmarks. Over the course of the next few months, slowly, more and more Democrats called for an investigation. Last week, the House voted to push the Ethics Committee on an investigation, while House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer publicly called for the matter to be looked into.

While this is a positive step, and an investigation would help to shed light on unethical practices, I believe we must go further, to the very source of the problem. I have had a longstanding policy

not to accept campaign contributions from any entities - including senior executives and lobbyists - on whose behalf my office requests earmarks. We should separate earmarks from campaign contributions, in the same way we separated lobbyist gifts from lawmakers.

Unfortunately, there is currently no rule that prohibits a member of Congress from accepting campaign contributions from the very same organizations for which the member is making appropriations requests. This means that there are members of Congress giving earmarks with one hand and taking campaign contributions from the very same folks with the other. This practice has the potential to create at the least the appearance of impropriety, if not an ethical and legal disaster. Worse still, the mixture of earmarks and campaign contributions will continue to erode the people's confidence in the actions and motivations of their elected representatives.

Given the immense benefits that federal investments can provide to communities that really need them - creating jobs, improving public facilities and infrastructure, or providing vital services - we must close this loophole and ensure a clean and accountable system.

Contribution ban

Along with Democratic Reps. Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona and Tom Perriello of Virginia and Republican Reps. John Campbell of California and Jeff Flake of Arizona, I have introduced the CLEAR Act (Clean Law for Earmark Accountability Reform Act) to put my own personal policy into law. It would ban congressional campaigns from accepting contributions from any senior executive or registered lobbyist representing an entity for which the member of congress has requested earmarked federal funding in that election cycle.

This is a matter of right and wrong. It is wrong that legislators request earmarks for companies or organizations and then turn around and take campaign contributions from the very same entities. This legislation may not be the whole answer, but it is the right step to restore public trust in the system.

A thorough investigation of ties between campaign contributions and earmarks will allow Congress to start to reform these practices. But we should go further and sever the link for good. We need to restore the trust and bond between the people and their government.

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