

November 3, 2016

Dear Member of Congress:

As you and your colleagues consider new rules for the next Congress, we urge you to consider closing a gap in House Rules that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to track the influence of outside groups who pay for fellows to work in Congressional offices. It is important that the American people, as citizens and taxpayers, have the utmost confidence in the integrity of Congressional operations; therefore, the undersigned groups urge you to consider a change to House rules to address this problem. While the rules allow Members to staff their offices with fellows who are paid by corporations, foundations, universities, non-profits, and other outside private entities, they do not require fellows or those offices to disclose this relationship.

In the Senate, the supervisor of the fellow is required by a Senate rule to report to the Ethics Committee “the identity of the source of the compensation received by such individual and the amount or rate of compensation paid by such source.” The House does not have a similar rule and does not require fellows or their supervisors to disclose the fellowship’s compensation details. Although the House Ethics Manual specifically states that these fellows cannot work on projects that will either directly or indirectly benefit their sponsoring organization, without a disclosure requirement there cannot be effective oversight of this program. A recent Project On Government Oversight investigation found significant conflicts of interest on the Senate side, but the lack of disclosure on the House side makes it impossible to conduct similar oversight.

There are several examples of House rules already in place that require similar disclosures which ensure Members are aware of the potential biases of the staff they hire and information they’re receiving. For example, current House rules require Members and staff to disclose travel paid for by an outside entity and any negotiations for future employment with a private entity. Similarly, witnesses who testify before Congress must disclose any government contracts they receive, and whether they have been paid by foreign governments.

Congressional fellowships are a valuable resource for both Congress and non-government professionals across disciplines. However, without proper oversight and transparency, this program may be misused at the expense of taxpayer interests and erode citizen trust in Congress. The kind of access to policymaking this fellowship program provides is invaluable for the entities who sponsor the fellowships and is yet another way they can affect the legislative process. Congressional staff members should be doing work that is in the best interest of taxpayers instead of pushing the priorities of powerful special interests.

There is enormous distrust of Washington by voters all around the country. Requiring Congressional fellows who are paid by third-party entities to publicly disclose the source of their compensation and the amount or rate of compensation would send a strong signal that Congress is working to earn that trust back.

Sincerely,

Downsize DC

Liberty Coalition

National Taxpayers Union

Project On Government Oversight

Rutherford Institute

Taxpayer Protection Alliance