

U.S. House Republicans Approve Republican Measure to Change Ethics Rules

Jan. 4 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. House of Representatives opened its 109th session by approving a Republican proposal to limit the ability of the chamber's ethics panel to open investigations of misconduct charges.

Passage of the measure, which allows ethics charges to be dismissed if the House ethics committee reaches a deadlock, came after Majority Leader Tom DeLay was admonished three times this fall by the ethics panel. The measure was the first test of the Republicans' expanded majority in the chamber after the November elections and drew criticism from Democrats and good-government groups.

"The Republican Party has already gone to extraordinary lengths to cover for and protect Mr. DeLay from his long pattern of unethical behavior," said Representative Louise Slaughter of New York, ranking Democrat of the House Rules Committee. "Now they are changing standing rules of the House to gut the ethics process, a shameful business for the majority to be involved in."

House Republicans gained three seats in November, bringing their majority to 232 of 435 seats. The new Congress was sworn in today after the House re-elected Republican Dennis Hastert of Illinois as speaker. The measure was included in a package of House rules changes that was approved 220-195. ***All Republicans voted in favor and all Democrats and the chamber's one independent voted against.***

'Presumption of Innocence'

Republican leaders, who last night abandoned two other plans to lower ethical standards after complaints from rank-and-file lawmakers, said the change improved the fairness of the ethics process because lawmakers would be investigated only if the panel decides a charge merits further examination. Current rules require an investigation of ethics charges if the panel -- divided evenly between the parties -- reaches a deadlock or takes no action within 45 days.

"This change restores a presumption of innocence," said House Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier, a California Republican.

At a closed-door meeting last night, Hastert withdrew a plan to lower the standards of conduct for House lawmakers. House Republicans agreed by voice vote to abandon a new rule that would have allowed DeLay to keep his post if he is indicted by a Texas grand jury.

The ethics panel rebuked DeLay three times in October and November. He was admonished for contacting the Federal Aviation Administration for political purposes, holding a golf fundraiser for energy executives that gave the appearance they could influence legislation, and offering to endorse the candidacy of a lawmaker's son in exchange for his vote in favor of Medicare legislation.

Committee Chairman

Representative Joel Hefley, a Colorado Republican who chairs the ethics committee, said in a statement yesterday that he opposed weakening the standards.

Hefley, who could be replaced by Republican leaders this week as chair of the ethics panel, voted in favor of the rules change today. In an interview in advance of the vote, he said there is "no question" ethics standards would be weakened by the change, but he felt he could support it after leaders dropped the "worst" proposals.

He said Hastert has not told him whether he will stay on as chairman. "I assume I'm going to get

booted, but I don't know," he said.

Party Discipline

Chellie Pingree, president of Common Cause, said in a statement that the House-approved change marks a step back in ethical standards for lawmakers. She said that House members on the ethics panel may now block probes of their party's lawmakers by refusing to take action. Common Cause is one of eight Washington-based watchdog and research organizations that lobbied against the rules change.

"If the parties enforce discipline, no ethics complaint will ever see the light of day," Pingree said.

Some Republican lawmakers said yesterday that they were wary of voting to loosen ethics rules the first day the House convenes for business for the year. Representative J.D. Hayworth, an Arizona Republican, said some lawmakers were fielding complaints from constituents about the proposed changes.

Dropping the other proposed changes "allows the Republicans to focus on the issues and the agenda before us, and not focus on Tom DeLay," said Representative Zach Wamp, a Tennessee Republican.

Requirement Dropped

The requirement that indicted House leaders step aside was dropped in November after three of DeLay's political associates were indicted in Texas on charges related to fund-raising for state political campaigns. DeLay, who has denied any wrongdoing, proposed to Republicans last night that they restore the old rule because the changes would provide fodder for attacks by Democrats, said Jonathan Grella, DeLay's spokesman.

DeLay also told lawmakers he is confident he won't be indicted, according to Grella and lawmakers who attended the meeting.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert told lawmakers that leaders would drop a proposed change that would lower the requirement for finding that a lawmaker violated the House's "code of conduct." In the three recent rebukes of DeLay, he was found in violation of the code, although he didn't violate any specific regulations or laws. Under the proposed change, an explicit violation would have had to occur.

DeLay could benefit from the rules change because he has one charge pending before the panel, Melanie Crew, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, noted in a statement. The ethics committee last year deferred action against DeLay on a charge alleging that DeLay violated House rules in operating the Texas-based PAC that is the subject of the indictments of his aides.

Texas Grand Jury

The panel said it would wait until the grand jury in Texas completes its work before deciding whether to investigate allegations that DeLay violated House rules because of the political action committee's fundraising from corporations.

Republicans took control of the House in 1995 after an election in which they promised greater accountability for lawmakers. Yet the House-approved ethics rule change is not the first time House Republicans have made it tougher to discipline lawmakers soon after one of their own party leaders was found in violation.

In 1997, months after then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich was reprimanded by the House and fined \$300,000 for the ethics committee's costs for investigating misleading statements he gave during a probe, they made a shift. Republicans pushed through the House a new rule that bars outside watchdog groups such as Common Cause from filing complaints -- closing off a chief source of charges in the past. The rule, which remains in effect, allows only lawmakers to file charges.

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