

## **Voters Send Powerful Mandate to Congress to Deal With Corruption and Ethics Problems**

### **Reform Groups Call for Immediate Action by New Congress on Lobbying and Ethics Reforms, Stress Need For Independent Ethics Enforcement Entity**

**Statement Issued At Press Conference on November 9, 2006, Held by Campaign Legal Center, Common Cause, Democracy 21, League of Women Voters, Public Citizen and U.S. PIRG**

On Tuesday, voters sent a powerful message to members of Congress that they must address the extraordinary corruption, ethics and lobbying scandals in Congress, and must do so quickly.

Tuesday's exit polls showed that voters considered corruption and ethics problems as their greatest concern, with 42 percent of voters responding that they were "extremely concerned" about corruption and ethics in Washington.

While all of our groups agree that reforming the nation's campaign finance laws is essential to addressing the corruption and lobbying scandals, our focus today is on the need for immediate action by the new Congress to pass comprehensive and effective ethics and lobbying reforms.

These reforms must include the creation of an independent ethics enforcement entity in Congress in order to fix the failed congressional ethics enforcement process.

The 109<sup>th</sup> Congress presented the nation with the worst congressional corruption and lobbying scandals in decades.

Yet, this Congress failed to enact any meaningful reforms, choosing to ignore the deep concerns that voters expressed on Tuesday about the corruption, ethics and lobbying scandals in Washington.

In Tuesday's election, the American people responded loud and clear to this disgraceful performance. They voted to change Congress.

A number of public opinion polls in the closing weeks of the campaign had previously indicated the public's deep concern about corruption in Washington.

A poll released by *CNN* (October 19, 2006), for example, found that "half of all Americans believe most members of Congress are corrupt" and "more than a third think their own representative is crooked."

The 109<sup>th</sup> Congress has utterly failed the American people in refusing to enact ethics and lobbying reforms. The new Congress must now do the right thing and pass comprehensive, effective reforms quickly.

We strongly applaud House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi for her public commitment prior to the election, and again on Election Night, to pass new ethics rules on the first day of the new Congress. We also commend Representative Pelosi for her legislation in this Congress, the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act (H.R. 4682), which contains a number of important and valuable ethics and lobbying reform provisions.

We call today on whoever becomes the new Senate Majority leader to make a similar public commitment for the Senate to act quickly to pass effective ethics and lobbying reforms.

Past experiences make clear that any delays in passing such government integrity reform measures will play into the hands of congressional opponents and Washington lobbyists by giving them time to undermine or kill the reforms.

We want to make three points today about the reform effort pledged in the House, which also apply to the efforts that must be undertaken in the Senate:

First, an independent ethics enforcement entity must be created to help enforce the congressional ethics rules.

Put simply, the House and Senate ethics committees have no credibility with the American people, and for good cause.

With the worst corruption and lobbying scandals in decades, the ethics committees took no public action to hold any member of Congress or any staff member accountable in connection with the scandals. Neither the House nor Senate ethics committees, furthermore, publicly undertook an investigation of Jack Abramoff's various scandalous activities in connection with Members and staff.

In the House, the Ethics Committee did not even operate for much of this Congress. Whatever happens with the Committee's investigation into the Mark Foley matter will not compensate for the House Ethics Committee's failure to do its job during this Congress, and it will not restore the Committee's public credibility.

Without a meaningful process to enforce the ethics rules, in essence, we don't have ethics rules. No matter how well ethics rules are written, Members and staff will end up doing whatever they want if there is no effective enforcement of the rules. Our groups strongly believe that in order to achieve effective ethics reform, Congress must establish an independent ethics enforcement entity to help enforce the ethics rules.

Second, we urge that any proposed new ethics rules be carefully reviewed to ensure that there will be no loopholes in the rules. New ethics rules on travel, meals, entertainment and other financial benefits currently being provided to Members must be effective and loophole-free.

For example, new ethics rules dealing with privately-financed trips must ensure that groups that lobby Congress are prohibited from directly, or indirectly, paying for domestic and foreign trips taken by Members and House staff.

Third, if as expected, the House acts only on ethics rules changes on the first day of the new Congress, we urge the House leadership to publicly make clear that other reforms that require legislation will be acted on by the House as soon as possible during the first 100 days of the new session.

The lobbying reform proposals contained in the Pelosi bill need to be re-introduced at the outset of the new Congress and lobbying reform legislation must be acted on quickly by the House and the Senate.

On Election Day, the American people made clear to Congress that the status quo in Washington is not acceptable and that real change must occur in the way business is done in Congress.

The phony lobbying and ethics bills that passed the House and Senate this year, and then withered away in conference, must be replaced with comprehensive, effective, loophole-free reform measures enacted quickly in the new Congress.

At stake here is the integrity and public credibility of Congress and its Members, and the interests of the American people in honest government.

