

The Honorable Paul D. Ryan, Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

November 5, 2015

Dear Speaker Ryan:

Recent embarrassing revelations about trips by Members and staff of the U.S. House of Representatives from both parties highlight the failure of current travel rules to protect the integrity of the House. We the undersigned organizations strongly encourage you, as one of your first acts as the new Speaker, to impose a moratorium on all privately-financed, foreign congressional travel and to establish a bipartisan Speaker's Task Force made up of the Chairs and Ranking Members from the House Committee on Ethics, the Committee on House Administration, and the two Chairs of the Office of Congressional Ethics to recommend new rules and guidelines regarding privately-financed foreign travel for Members and staff.

Until the American public can have confidence that the House rules and practices adequately disclose who is paying for their elected Representatives' foreign travel and protect against special interests gaining inappropriate access to Members and staff through these trips related to Members' official duties, all privately-financed foreign trips should be halted.

We recognize that, in many instances, congressional travel can have important educational value. However, because the rules governing privately-funded congressional travel are weak and the proposed trips are not being appropriately scrutinized, this currently permissible travel has become a gaping loophole, as was predicted during consideration of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act (HLOGA). The privately-financed travel loophole is ripe for exploitation by interests with matters pending before Congress and undermines the purposes of the HLOGA and House ethics rules and standards.

Published reports demonstrate that concerns about privately-financed travel raised during consideration of HLOGA have become realized. The Office of Congressional Ethics recently issued a report laying out how the sources of funds and sponsorship of Members' and staff travel to Azerbaijan were purposefully obfuscated and that obvious red flags of the deception, such as multiple groups claiming sole responsibility for sponsoring the trip and none of these groups had sufficient funds to pay for the trip, were ignored by the House Committee on Ethics (See *The Washington Post*: [10 members of Congress took trip secretly funded by foreign government](#); and *Point of Order*: [Lessons from a Byzantine Scandal](#)). *Roll Call* recently reported that "hidden sources, never vetted by the House Ethics Committee, footed the bill for five-star hotels and dining during some members' all-expenses-paid jaunts" to Turkey. In addition, *ProPublica* uncovered evidence of another expensive congressional trip secretly paid for by a foreign government. *USA Today* reported this past July, "Congressional expenditures on foreign travel are at their highest levels in five years, and private sponsors spent more than \$5 million last year flying lawmakers and staff to gatherings near and far." The amount of privately-sponsored travel, once slashed by HLOGA to one-third its previous levels, is again rising near to the level of the Jack Abramoff travel junket era.

The questions that the Speaker's Task Force should review include:

- Does the rule permitting privately-financed travel continue to serve the House well or should it be significantly revised?
- Should the House create a budget from public funds to finance official trips? What are the reasons to allow private interests to finance travel when all of the other functions related to the official duties of Representatives (such as computers, office space, salaries) are financed by taxpayers? If the trip is related to official duties, why should a private party pay for it and therefore control the agenda of trip, influencing what the lawmakers see and learn?
- Are current procedures used by the House Committee on Ethics adequate to discover if shell entities are providing resources to a sponsoring organization?
- What in current House rules and procedures prevents foreign governments and businesses, which may be working against U.S. interests, from funneling money to an organization by paying for congressional trips?

The spate of recent news reports raising significant questions about the true sources and purposes surrounding privately-financed foreign Member travel has damaged the credibility of the House and undermined public confidence in the institution. It is imperative for you, as the Speaker, to lead the House in reviewing current rules and practices regarding privately-sponsored foreign travel. Until the rules are reviewed and strengthened, these trips should not continue.

Again, we want to emphasize that we understand the value of congressional travel and believe it is important for Members and staff to see and understand the impact on the world as a whole of their public policy decisions. However, too often these trips have become a tool for special interests, foreign governments, and foreign business interests to try to gain access and influence to our elected leaders while obfuscating the source of funding for these trips. We also hope that this process could lead to a larger review of the current rules governing travel by Members, including whether current rules provide sufficient transparency and adequate protections against conflicts of interest and access-and-influence buying.

We strongly urge you to appoint a Task Force and to put in place a moratorium on all privately-financed foreign travel until stronger rules and improved enforcement mechanisms are in place.

Sincerely,

Campaign Legal Center
Common Cause
Democracy 21
League of Women Voters
Professor James Thurber
Project on Government Oversight
Public Citizen

cc: Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi
House Committee on Ethics
Committee on House Administration
Office of Congressional Ethics