



Fashioning the More Ethical Representative: The Impact of Ethics Reforms in the U.S. House of Representatives

Rebekah Herrick

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An ethics climate of suspicion and concern about conflicts of interest exists in U.S. politics, resulting in efforts to improve ethical conduct for Congress and an infrastructure to enforce them. Herrick examines various effects of the climate and ethics standards on the House of Representatives. The reforms had a positive effect on members' behavior with few costs. The ethics rules addressed behaviors that potentially harm the legislative process and House members altered their behavior to comply with the rules. Members who violate the standards were less likely to leave Congress, although a lack of electoral competition and members' power in the chamber can insulate them from electoral defeat or forced retirement.

As Herrick documents, the concern with congressional ethics increased the number of members accused of unethical behavior and consequently modestly decreased the public's approval of Congress. But, by disciplining members, the new ethics increased congressional approval. Other negative effects include encouraging ethical members to retire, modestly decreasing the number of bills passed, and preventing members accused of violating the rules from carrying out their responsibilities. As a way to understand how to further improve members' ethics, Herrick offers a model that predicts which members were likely to violate the ethics standards. Based on the findings, three recommendations are offered to improve the ethics process: improve congressional elections, create an outside commission to investigate ethics violations, and discourage false charges against members.

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