

HEATHER WILSON
1ST DISTRICT, NEW MEXICO

ENERGY AND COMMERCE

SUBCOMMITTEES:
TELECOMMUNICATIONS
AND THE INTERNET

ENERGY AND AIR QUALITY
ENVIRONMENT AND
HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

PERMANENT SELECT
COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

SUBCOMMITTEES:
TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL INTELLIGENCE
CHAIR

OVERSIGHT
INTELLIGENCE POLICY

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3101

318 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-3101
(202) 225-6316
FAX: (202) 225-4975

20 FIRST PLAZA, NW
SUITE 603
ALBUQUERQUE, NM 87102
(505) 346-6781
FAX: (505) 346-6723
<http://wilson.house.gov>

Written Statement of Congresswoman Heather Wilson
Before the Rules Committee
March 30, 2006

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to be here today in order to voice my support for a strong lobbying and reform package. I think that this bill is a good beginning for serious lobby reform, but several other provisions must be included in any reform package in order to implement true reform in Congress.

Although greater disclosure of lobbying activities and providing greater transparency into the process of influencing the government, as well as ensuring greater accountability among public officials are worthy goals, there are other, substantive changes that need to be made in terms of Congressional lobby reform.

Federal laws dictate the circumstances under which former Members of Congress and staff may become lobbyists. In order to limit what has been perceived as undue or improper influence, restrictions have been adopted to limit the post-employment lobbying of former members of Congress after leaving government service. For one year after a Member leaves office, they may not lobby on any matter before any Member, officer or employee of the entire legislative branch of government. Even so, I support increasing that "cooling off" period to two years.

The problem with gifts isn't the limit, it is the failure to enforce the gift rule effectively. There are a variety of measures that can be rewritten to improve enforcement so that violators are detected, investigated and appropriately punished.

One of the most important things that the House can do would be to put our ethics investigators at arms length from members themselves. This can be done by creating an ethics board of former members, and by allowing non-members to report possible violations.

An Office of Public Integrity (OPI), like the one suggested by Mr. Shays's bill, would help Congress be effective and accountable, both to itself and to the public. In the current situation, Congress is left policing itself, and it isn't doing a good job of that. Other government institutions function with Inspector Generals who review complaints and also reprimand false allegations. I think the House can too.

Current rules regarding travel for Members, officers or Congressional employees are strict, but recent cases have shown that crooked people can circumvent the rules. When a privilege is abused, it goes away. I support banning all privately funded travel by members of Congress.

There are some elements of our House ethics program I have been critical of—particularly the lack of education and a preventative approach, inconsistent answers when a member requests guidance, and a propensity of some to use “ethics” as a tool in partisan politics. HR 4975 addresses this by implementing mandatory ethics training for all current and future employees of the House. We need a comprehensive review of the ethics rules to make sure they address current issues.

When I was 17 years old I started living under the Honor Code of the Air Force Academy. It marks you for life. You not only have to live by it, you have to lead by it too. The lying, cheating and stealing are the easy parts. It is the not tolerating those who commit these actions that is tough. We in Congress must strengthen our ethics and lobbying rules and enforcement to weed out these problems.

I urge the Committee to consider strong ethics and lobby reform measures, such as those included in Senator McCain’s lobbying reform bill, introduced in the House by Congressman Shays. I also believe that the House reform bill must include the creation of a third party ethics council, such as the Office of Public Integrity. Congress has been unable to police itself, and it is time to turn over ethics investigations to a non-partisan third party.

Heather Wilson