The Disappearing Ethics Act

In a woeful signal to the new Congress, the House ethics committee has decided that when it comes to money and ethics, money nearly always wins.

The panel ruled there was no appearance of a conflict of interest committed by three lawmakers who held fund-raising meetings with financial industry executives and lobbyists at a time when Congress was voting on stronger financial regulations.

That decision stands in shameful contrast to the panel’s official admonishment in 2004 of Tom DeLay, the former Republican majority leader, after he attended an energy industry fund-raiser before an energy vote. It advised members against attending any fund-raiser that “gives even an appearance that donors will receive or are entitled to either special treatment or special access.”

The quasi-independent Office of Congressional Ethics certainly got it, advising the panel to take action after investigators found discomfiting appearances of special treatment, even if there were no quid-pro-quo violations.

Questionable behavior included offers to donors of one-on-one meetings with lawmakers, close participation of Congressional staffers in fund-raising, and even a lobbyist’s discussing both legislating and fund-raising with a Congressional chief of staff, according to the newspaper Roll Call. Even so, the committee agreed with its own staff’s conclusion that the overlap of lawmaking and fund-raising activity was innocent “happenstance.”

The ruling lets the Capitol’s platoons of fund-raising consultants, lobbyists and Congressional campaign machines march forward in their nightly pursuits of money and influence. The three representatives — Joseph Crowley, a Democrat of New York; Tom Price, a Republican of Georgia; and John Campbell, a Republican of California — can rightly claim they have been fully cleared.

Unfortunately, the weakened standard is of a piece with the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize unlimited corporate donations to federal candidates. The Republican House has...
voted to end the publicly subsidized alternative to big-money presidential campaigning. How low they can go? Even lower we fear.