Not Too Much Ethics, Please

House Republicans are chortling over the Democratic majority's troubles with ethics allegations, but they also are ominously signaling their distaste for the Office of Congressional Ethics — the one new player on Capitol Hill with a clear determination to do something about the morass.

The Republican minority leader, John Boehner, said he wants to “take a look” at the office if his party regains majority power — a reminder that his members fiercely opposed the quasi-independent office when it was created two years ago by Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Mr. Boehner wondered aloud how effective the office really is, ignoring its considerable record for discreetly investigating alleged misbehavior on both sides of the aisle and letting the chips fall where they may. It was the ethics office that did the initial investigatory work prompting (forcing might be the more apt description) the House ethics committee to order a public hearing into whether Representative Maxine Waters, a Democrat of California, committed a conflict of interest by intervening on behalf of a bailout for a bank in which her husband owned stock.

The ethics case against Representative Charles Rangel, a Democrat of New York, predates the creation of the ethics office, but he ran afoul of its investigators more recently in being admonished by the House committee for leading a group on a Caribbean junket paid by corporate favor-seekers in violation of House rules.

Grumblers on both sides want to gut the ethics office. That is because it has been fulfilling its mission to put life into the lawmakers’ own stultified ethics process, to penetrate the murk of misbehavior and keep the public better informed. Republicans would be the ultimate hypocrites to subvert the ethics office while campaigning as the all-new party of reform that, ah, yes, learned its lesson after the Jack Abramoff corruption scandal.