



# DEMAND PROGRESS

EDUCATION FUND

July 22, 2019

The Honorable Susan Wild  
The Honorable Van Taylor  
Bipartisan Working Group  
Committee on Ethics  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

**RE: Congressional Fellows Paid by Outside Entities**

Dear Representatives Wild and Taylor:

The Committee on Ethics established a bipartisan working group and requested public comment concerning the development of regulations to address Members, officers, or employees of the House holding positions with outside entities that may lead to actual or perceived conflicts of interest.<sup>1</sup> We wish to raise a concern regarding congressional fellows that are funded by outside entities.

By way of background, Demand Progress Education Fund is a public non-profit that educates our more than two million members and the general public about matters pertaining to

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<https://ethics.house.gov/press-release/statement-chairman-and-ranking-member-committee-ethics-regarding-establishment-worki-0>

the democratic nature of our nation's communications infrastructure and governance structures, and the impacts of corporate power over our economy and democracy.

Congressional offices routinely make use of fellows that are funded by outside entities. Some are funded by elements of the federal government and others are funded by the private sector. There is no comprehensive list of congressional fellowships, although the Congressional Research Service has compiled a partial list as part of a Congressional Distribution Memorandum entitled "Congressional Fellowship Programs."<sup>2</sup>

Our review suggests there are hundreds of Congressional fellows serving in the House of Representatives. A 2016 report by the Project on Government Oversight found that conflicts of interest have arisen from these fellowships and that fellows can use their positions to influence policy and serve the interests of their industry.<sup>3</sup> We hope this is an uncommon occurrence.

Congressional fellows, when utilized properly, provide valuable insight and perspectives to Congressional offices. However, it is harmful to Congress should their positions be funded to push a particular policy perspective while they serve in Congress or as a way to build relationships that can be exploited for advocacy purposes in the future.

We respectfully suggest that the House should gain a better understanding of the scope and nature of possible conflicts of interest.

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<sup>2</sup> We have a copy of the memo.

<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2016/09/insidious-and-totally-legal-way-that-industry-has-infiltrated-congress/>

Accordingly, the House of Representatives should require the creation of a regularly-updated publicly-available database identifies all Congressional Fellows that are paid for by outside sources, whether by the government or the private sector. It should include the original source of those funds and any pass-through entities, the funding amount, where the staffer is placed, whether the funder engages in federal advocacy or is part of a coalition or association that engages in advocacy, and any intermediary entities that helps to place the staffer.

In addition, House rules should prohibit former fellows from lobbying the office in which they served for one year after the end of the fellowship.

We have found that some fellowships are tuition based, where people pay tuition to a third party to work as a fellow in Congress. We believe this is unethical and should be banned.

We also have reason to believe that some fellows funded by the executive branch become a “liaison” for the funding entity — which is another word for a lobbyist — and use their relationships to lobby their former congressional employer after the fellowship has ended. There is further reason to believe that determinations on whether to provide an executive branch fellow may turn on how favorable the congressional office is to the executive branch agency that places the fellow. If true, this is harmful to the independent operations of Congress. It should be investigated.

We appreciate your interest in identifying these conflicts of interest and drafting regulations that help ameliorate the dangers of undue influence. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and apologize for the late submission of these comments.

Please contact Daniel Schuman, policy director, Demand Progress at

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