

Ethics in Congress

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 3, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This morning's New York Times has [an article](#) [1] on how the leveling of ethics charges against two long-serving, congressional giants, Rep. Charles Rangel and Rep. Maxine Waters, shows that the reforms adopted four years ago when the Democrats took control of the House are working. True enough.

But, the reforms are not working for the Democrats. The last thing they need going into a midterm election is a headline that reads "Another Democrat Faces Ethics Charges." In the UK, the parliamentary scandals certainly contributed as much to the defeat of the Labor Party as did any policy proposals coming forth from the Conservatives.

Rep. Rangel and Waters are free to fight the charges leveled against them. In America, people, even members of Congress, are presumed innocent until proven guilty. But the whole point of ethics rules is to set a higher standard. Criminal wrong-doing is already against the law and subject to prosecution.

Over the weekend, an unnamed Congressional Black Caucus staff member raised the specter of racism behind the charges. This is grossly misplaced. I am one of those who thinks that racism continues to affect our politics in many ugly ways, but there is no evidence that members of the CBC have been targeted. It seems more likely that both Rangel and Waters fell prey to the sense of entitlement that comes from representing majority-minority districts where they thought they could never lose. The CBC has long connived with Republicans in redistricting battles to maintain these majority-minority districts, so any sympathy for them is also misplaced.

What Rangel and Waters need to decide is which is more important, their lifetime of commitment to policies they believe are correct, or their incumbency. If they continue to fight the charges publicly, and run for re-election, they may well contribute to bringing down the majority that has enacted so many of the policy goals to which they have dedicated their political careers. It is not use thinking they can salvage their good names: The mere fact of the ethics charges will always be a part of their biographies. They should exit stage right if they want their party and their policies to have a chance to continue to shape the nation in the next two years.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/03/us/politics/03watersanalysis.html?_r=1&hp