Contending with conflicts

Congress has created a body of laws that act as public-alert systems to both prevent and reveal when powerful private and public figures abuse their authority to boost personal wealth. The ethics laws — and rules from regulatory organizations — require that officials and executives disclose details of their personal finances to protect the public from corruption, including insider trading.

In many cases, the laws that Congress has passed for others are more stringent than those they impose on themselves. Legislation has been introduced this year to help close the gap, but one of the bill's sponsors, Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.), concedes he is facing an uphill battle. “We have no problem making strict rules for others, but we have a difficult time doing it for ourselves,” Baird said.

— Kimberly Kindy