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Patrick’s Politics:

The sexual misconduct “norm” in government

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Two congressmembers, Eric Swalwell (D-CA) and Tony Gonzales (R-TX), resigned from the House of Representatives on Tuesday following allegations of sexual misconduct. Both had been facing calls to leave or be expelled. The cases are certainly somewhat different; Gonzales was accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a staffer who later committed suicide, and Swalwell reportedly committed sexual assault and rape against several women. While these cases resulted in at least some form of consequences for both members, the nature of these allegations exposes the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct in government, which remains troublingly prevalent. There is a hush-up culture in government that lets people in power maintain their roles, all while putting down accusers.

At both the state and federal levels of U.S. government, sexual harassment, abuse and assault are frighteningly common. Since the #MeToo movement emerged almost a decade ago, more than a dozen members of Congress have been accused of sexual misconduct. After the first wave of allegations in 2017, Congress has seen an uptick in the past few years; including Swalwell and Gonzales, six lawmakers have been investigated since 2021. At this current moment, Rep. Cory Mills (R-FL) is under two separate pending investigations for violations of the House’s sexual misconduct policy. At the state level, the problem is also widespread. According to a 2025 article from PBS, 147 lawmakers from 44 states have faced sexual misconduct allegations.

Many officials in the executive and judiciary branches also carry their own allegations. Multiple members of President Donald Trump’s cabinet have a history of sexual assault accusations, to say nothing of Trump’s own long list of sordid misconduct. Former Rep. Matt Gaetz, who was initially nominated as Trump’s attorney general pick, was being investigated for a sexual relationship with a minor before he dropped out of consideration. All of this was before the Trump administration was forced to release the Epstein files, which revealed further connections between Trump, other government officials and Epstein’s sex crimes. On the judiciary’s part, two current Supreme Court justices, Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh, had sexual assault allegations come up during their Senate confirmation hearings.

These widespread allegations, having often gone unresolved and unpunished, have created a culture of silence and allowance. Members of Congress, when they become aware of suspicious rumors, often dismiss or don’t act on them. Democratic Sen. Ruben Gallego echoed this sentiment when asked for comment on the Swalwell affair: “We all heard ru-

mors in Washington, D.C., about Eric Swalwell for many years,” he said. Yet this collective group of lawmakers, who could have acted on these tips, all chose not to. When you consider that both Democrats and Republicans voted down a House proposal to make the sexual harassment settlements of legislators public just a month ago, this apathetic attitude makes sense. Congress would prefer to sweep any misdeeds under the rug rather than have to go through more politically painful reckonings. But the culture of silence is exactly what allows offenders like Swalwell and Gonzales to believe themselves secure in their wrongdoing. By relying on outside pressure to force accountability, Congress is opening itself up to continued sexual misconduct.

The silence and smothering of this disgusting conduct also percolates from the top of government, where consequences are few and far between. The #MeToo wave, which promised accountability for powerful men, only went so far. Trump was able to shrug off the many allegations against him, despite being one of the worst offenders, and win another presidential term. In having so many cabinet members accused of sexual assault, Trump has normalized this conduct and tried to roll back the accountability advocates fought for at the start of #MeToo. The resurgence of sexism and misogyny associated with Trump’s administration has put more pressure on victims; several victims of Epstein and his accomplices said they had received death threats for speaking out about their experiences. When victims are blamed and horrific behavior is not punished at the upper echelons of government, we should not be surprised when ordinary legislators feel emboldened to partake in inappropriate sexual activity.

Perhaps the most cynical aspect of the latest misconduct-related resignations is the political calculus made by both parties. The expulsion measures were coordinated between Democrats and Republicans so that each party would lose a member at the same time, keeping the Republicans’ very slight majority. This was allowable because it did not upset the power balance in the House. Before then, however, Republicans were willing to let Gonzales serve out the remainder of his term. The attitude of only demanding full accountability when the political environment permits is not surprising, but this does not change the fact that it’s deeply wrong and self-serving.

Congress’ flawed way of dealing with sexual assault allegations will remain a stain on the institution until it is fixed. Our government as a whole is tainted by the widespread and pervasive nature of sexual misconduct, and it must be corrected. If we truly are committed to preventing cases like Swalwell and Gonzales from spreading, the complicit silence and acceptance from the system cannot be allowed to continue.



Former Texas state Rep. Tony Gonzales at a press conference where he discussed border control for Texas back in January of 2024. Gonzales has recently resigned after many sexual misconduct allegations came out against him.

PHOTO COURTESY @REPTONYGONZALES ON INSTAGRAM.



Former Rep Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, 2017. Swalwell recently resigned amid several sexual misconduct allegations being made against him.

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