

# Why Should Anthony Weiner Remain in Congress?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 06/14/11 12:52 PM ET

Instead of asking whether or not Representative Anthony Weiner should resign, it is more useful to ask if he should stay in Congress. The arguments for Weiner to resign are reasonably clear, including points based on morality, that his behavior is simply too sleazy and disturbing, legality, that the communications he had with young women, particularly if they are minors, constitute a form of harassment, practicality, that he will have a hard time focusing on the work of being in Congress if his time is taken up with the fallout from the scandal, and politics, that his continued presence in Congress weakens the Democrats chance of winning back the House of Representatives in November. These are all strong points, but could be outweighed if there was a compelling reason for Weiner to stay in Congress.

Several different rationales have been presented for why Weiner should remain in Congress. The first is that Weiner is a strong and courageous voice for progressive causes and that should he leave Congress, the Democrats would love this important voice and his constituents would lose an able and diligent representative. The first half of this assertion is true. Weiner has been outspoken on issues such as health care and in attacking Republicans for being captured by various corporate interests. He also has fought hard for the interests of the Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods which he represents.

The weakness of this argument is that Weiner is not irreplaceable. His is not the only progressive voice in Congress, although it is one of the loudest, nor is he likely to be replaced by a Republican eager to undermine President Obama. Weiner represents an overwhelmingly Democratic district in which there is no shortage of bold and outspoken progressives who could easily continue the positive contributions Weiner has made in Congress.

A second argument is that Republicans get away with sex related scandals, for example David Vitter [visiting](#) prostitutes, and that Democrats should not rush to destroy one of their own. This point is also true, but not important. The fact that Republican members of Congress do something cannot become a compelling reason for Democrats to act similarly. On the contrary, it would be a big political advantage for the Democrats if they could present themselves as the party that demands more out of their elected officials.

It is also true that the Democrats should not rush to destroy one of their own. Weiner has been a good progressive Democrat in Washington, albeit a media hungry, often selfish and rarely well-liked one, and for that reason the party should not seek to destroy him. If

the scandal had been limited to one photograph or one woman, it would be easier to argue that Weiner should be protected by his party. Similarly, if Weiner had not initially responded to the stories of his internet exploits by lying, Democrats might owe him something. By this point, Weiner has done enough damage to himself and his party, and conducted himself so poorly, that Democrats prove nothing other than a belligerent sense of partisan tribalism by supporting Congressman Weiner.

Another line of reasoning for why Weiner should not resign is that forcing people out of office because of sex related scandals is the wrong way to do politics, undermines basic freedoms and will lead to winnowing the pool of people in politics to those who have never taken risks, done anything interesting, or made a mistake. The principle behind this argument is sound. Limiting our elected officials to those who have never had extra-marital affairs, taken drugs or had other personal issues would be a mistake.

This view, however, only has bearing on Anthony Weiner if his actions are seen as comparable to extra-marital affairs and the like and are best treated as a private issue between Weiner and his wife. Weiner's activities go beyond simply having an affair as electronically sending photos to several women, most of whom admired him because of his work, is more troubling and suggests an attitude and behavior towards women that should not be allowed in any workplace, including Congress.

Regardless of whether or not he resigns, Weiner will have a very difficult time getting back to where he was before this scandal broke. His aspirations to become mayor of New York have been badly damaged, but it is still likely that if he makes it through the next few weeks, he could get reelected to Congress, and every two years after that for a while. Importantly, this does not mean that he would easily go back to being a visible and leading member of Congress because the Democratic leadership would not want him to be the party's face, and for the short term, the prospect of ethics hearings, would cloud his tenure in Congress.

While the reasons why Weiner should resign immediately are legitimate but not airtight arguments, the reasons why Weiner should stay in Congress are far less compelling. Accordingly, supporters of Weiner should ask themselves whether these are the principles, and the person, for which they think it is really worth fighting.