

Inside the Anti-Incumbent “Revolution”

Toward the end of 2006, as the looming financial crisis was gaining steam, Robert Fowler, a real estate broker from Duluth, Ga., decided he was fed up with politics as usual in Washington. He didn't very much like what the administration of George W. Bush was doing to his America; but more than that, he says, he didn't like what *politicians* were doing to his America. So, he decided to take them on. All of them.

Today, the website he started that year as a result of his frustration, www.anti-incumbents.com, serves as a clearing house for information and discussion on a trend that is receiving a lot of attention this election cycle.

Fowler's site is one of at least a half-dozen online portals dedicated to incumbent bashing. He says the sudden attention the issue has received among election watchers and the media has driven visitors to his site and reporters to his doorstep in an effort to get a grasp of exactly what's going on.

A self-described independent who voted for Barack Obama, Fowler, 62, thinks it was the government's handling of the financial crisis that led to the current round of anti-incumbency.

"I truly believe the financial crisis woke people up," he said. "I think that was the thing, when they really got hurt... and unemployment went up, it hit home and people started paying attention."

Like many of his fellow anti-incumbents, Fowler directs his anger more at Congress than at the White House. (In fact, he says there's a good chance he'll vote for Obama again in 2012).

In the meantime his goal is to convince as many voters as possible to "vote the bums out," as he puts it, in upcoming midterm elections, on the belief that a sweeping change in Congress will send an important message to Capitol Hill that voters will only take so much.

"What we're doing now is not working," said Fowler.

At least some voters are taking that message to heart. So far this year, in several high-profile primary races, congressional incumbents and establishment-backed candidates from both sides of the aisle got backhanded in spite of (or more likely because of) support from Washington.

In Pennsylvania, on May 28 Democratic Sen. Arlen Specter -- a six-term incumbent who switched parties twice in his four-decade career -- was soundly defeated by two-term Congressman Joe

Sestak. Specter not only had the support of the state's Democratic machine, but President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden had both stumped for the candidate.

On the same day in Kentucky, tea-party activist Rand Paul won that state's GOP Senate primary, beating Secretary of State Trey Grayson by a wide margin despite Grayson having the support of Dick Cheney, Rudy Giuliani and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Meanwhile, Sen. Blanche Lincoln, a centrist Democrat from Arkansas, faces a runoff next Tuesday, June 8, against progressive challenger Bill Halter. Lincoln is seeking a third term in the Senate.

The press has wasted little time adopting the anti-incumbency frame and running with it. And while it's hard to deny something is going on, the "runaway anti-incumbency" narrative is one that not everyone is completely buying.

Writing for *Newsweek*, Andrew Romano noted that in primary races held last Tuesday (June 1) in Alabama, Mississippi and New Mexico, only a single incumbent – Rep. Parker Griffith, a newly minted Republican who switched parties last year and enjoyed strong GOP support –lost to a challenger.

Other pundits have noticed the same thing. Terry Madonna, director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, says that in spite of the media attention paid to Sestak's defeat of Specter in Pennsylvania's Democratic primary, it's a stretch to attribute the outcome to an anti-incumbent mood.

"You got a five-term incumbent who's 80 years-old running against a vigorous opponent, a Navy veteran, in an environment where he switches his party," Madonna said. "It just overwhelmed him and in some ways there was almost nothing he could do to stop him."

He says the fact that the voters chose Sestak over Specter had more to do with the challenger's "brilliant" television campaign and the fact that core Democrats never fully adopted Specter as one of their own. He goes on to point out that of the 224 Pennsylvania incumbents seeking reelection this year on both the state and federal level, only one, besides Specter, lost re-nomination.

But Madonna is careful not to write off the trend completely, he just seems to think it's been blown a little out of proportion.

"As a generalized anti-incumbency in the primary we didn't see evidence of it," he said. "But I will admit that moving forward... do I think there's some anti-incumbency, yes, do I think incumbents need to worry about the fall, yes, but it wasn't as evident in [the primary] at this time."

Anyway you slice it 2010 is shaping up to be the year of the challenger; by last count there are roughly 2,300 non-incumbent candidates seeking to fill 471 open congressional seats this year, more than any year since the mid-1970s.

Recent polling suggests they have a chance. A CNN poll, released on May 25, found 47 percent of the public is more likely to vote for a challenger rather than an incumbent running for re-election at the federal, state or local level.

An earlier poll, conducted in April by ABC News/Washington Post, found just a third of registered voters were inclined to re-elect their representatives to congress. And a Harris Interactive poll from May found that half of Americans (49%) say almost everyone in Congress, including their representative, should be thrown out.

“Anti-incumbent sentiment is as high in 2010 as it was in 1994,” said CNN Polling Director Keating Holland, referring to the year Republicans rode a wave of voter discontent to retake the House for the first time in 40 years.

But Fowler says while that might seem like a sweeping mandate, there’s a big difference between sentiment and action, the latter of which is harder to predict.

“People have a low approval rating of Congress, yet they still vote for their congressman – so that’s not going to work,” he said, “just because I don’t like your congressman, but I’ll keep voting mine back in.”

People are reluctant to vote out their representatives for a number of reasons, he says, ranging from money that senior legislators can bring to a state to seniority on committees that would be lost with a freshman congressman. It’s of little surprise, then, that for the past four decades congressional re-election rates dropped below 60 percent just once. Data from the Center for Responsive Politics shows that from 1964 through 2008, incumbents in the House of Representatives averaged a 93 percent re-election rate; members of the Senate averaged 83 percent.

Adding to the problem, critics say, is the unlimited number of terms a congressman can hold, which leads them to become so entrenched in their positions that politics becomes a profession instead of a calling.

“It seems the politicians have a lock on things and once people get voted into office it’s hard to get them out,” said Fowler, who says he supports placing limits on the number of terms a congressman can hold office.

Ironically, some on Capitol Hill are taking the first step in addressing that. In November 2009, echoing language in the 1994 GOP “Contract with America,” four Republican senators led by South Carolina’s Jim DeMint introduced a constitutional amendment that would limit the number of terms that a member of Congress may serve to three in the House of Representatives and two in the Senate.

DeMint said the amendment is needed because the power of incumbency has grown so great.

"Americans know real change in Washington will never happen until we end the era of permanent politicians," DeMint said in a statement. "I have come to realize that if we want to change the policies coming out of Congress, we must change the process itself. If we really want to put an end to business as usual, we've got to have new leaders coming to Washington instead of rearranging the deck chairs as the ship goes down."

But Republicans shouldn't get too comfortable. Numbers show that despite popular belief the greatest challenge to incumbents this year is coming from the right, with nearly twice as many Republican candidates seeking office as Democrats. For the most part the challenge is coming from conservative and Libertarian candidates like Rand Paul and Alabama's N.C. "Clint" Moser, whose failed attempt last week to unseat four-term Republican Senator Richard Shelby was based on a platform so extreme he pledged to kick the United Nations out of New York.

Which leads to the question of where the tea-party movement fits into the anti-incumbency trend. For the most part, people like Fowler have a tacit respect for the reactionary nature of the movement, but they chafe at the movement's apparent extremism and the fact that it has been co-opted by the right.

"We Independents thought the tea parties were a good idea until the Republicans claimed them as their own," said Fowler. "They would like to think it's only the current administration we are protesting and we are on their side. That is how they are trying to position this."

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