

Scandals, retirements decimate congressional Republicans

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Some two dozen Republican congressmen and senators have announced their retirement from office or face well-publicized corruption probes that could put an end to their political careers, making it likely that the Democratic Party will increase its margin of control of both houses of the US Congress in the 2008 elections.

The retirement of six-term senator Pete Domenici of New Mexico, announced Thursday, means that six of the 22 Republican senators whose terms expire next year will not seek reelection, leaving open seats that are far more vulnerable to the Democrats. Besides Domenici, Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, John Warner of Virginia, Larry Craig of Idaho and Wayne Allard of Colorado have announced their retirements. A sixth senator, Craig Thomas of Wyoming, died in office.

A seventh senator, Ted Stevens of Alaska, the senior Republican in the upper house, is now viewed as vulnerable to challenge, or even indictment, as the result of a bribery scandal implicating a large number of state politicians, including his son, Ben Stevens, a state senator.

The 75-year-old Domenici cited serious health reasons for his stepping down from the seat he has held since 1972. Long one of the most powerful figures in the Senate, as chairman of the Budget Committee from 1994 to 2002, then chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Domenici has been under investigation by the Senate Ethics Committee this year over links to the politically motivated dismissal of the US attorney for Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Still another Republican senator has been caught up in scandal, ultra-conservative David Vitter of Louisiana, but he does not face reelection until 2010. While Vitter's offense is unlikely to produce criminal prosecution—he has admitted patronizing a call girl operation in Washington DC and is accused of hiring a prostitute in New Orleans as well—such conduct might have been expected to provoke demands for his resignation from the Christian fundamentalist right.

No such calls have been issued, however, since the governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, is a Democrat, who would select Vitter's replacement. Blanco is not running for reelection this year, and a Republican is favored to replace her. In that event, Vitter may well be forced out by his own party, to be replaced by a likeminded ultra-right politician.

The rate of attrition is extraordinary, given that only one incumbent Republican senator retired before the 2006 election. The departure of so many incumbents has worsened the already dim outlook for the Republican Party in next year's congressional elections.

While the Democrats presently control the upper house by only a narrow 51-49 margin, Republicans must defend 22 of the 34 seats on the ballot in 2008, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has already conceded that there is no prospect of the Republican Party regaining control of the Senate next year.

Six of the 22 Republican-held seats will be open, without an incumbent, and possibly as many as seven if Stevens decides not to run. At least a half dozen more among the incumbents could face significant challenges,

including those running in Maine, New Hampshire, Minnesota and Oregon, states that voted against Bush in 2004 and where antiwar sentiment prevails. By contrast, only one Democratic incumbent, Mary Landrieu in Louisiana, has been seriously targeted by the Republicans.

In the House of Representatives, eight long-serving Republicans have announced their retirement over the past two months, including two former members of the leadership: former Speaker of the House Denis Hastert of Illinois and Deborah L. Pryce of Ohio, former chairman of the House Republican Caucus. Long-serving Congressman Paul Gillmor of Ohio died suddenly last month, leaving his seat open. Another half dozen Republicans are reported to be targets of a federal investigation for possible ties to Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who pled guilty to bribing numerous congressmen, or other corruption scandals.

One of the latest Republicans to announce his retirement, Jerry Weller of the 11th Congressional District in Illinois, centered on the industrial city of Joliet, epitomizes the intersection of corruption and political reaction in American bourgeois politics. Only 50 years old, Weller clearly did not decide to retire because of age.

He has been the target of a series of exposés in the local press about questionable land deals in Central America, as well as the financial affairs of his wife, Zury Rios de Weller, daughter of the former Guatemalan military dictator who oversaw mass killings, General Efraín Ríos Montt. The week before announcing his retirement Weller was subpoenaed to testify as a defense witness for a military contractor facing charges of bribing former Republican Congressman Randy Cunningham.

The other retirees include Ray LaHood of Illinois, Charles Pickering of Mississippi, Jim Ramstad of Minnesota, Terry Everett of Alabama and Rick Renzi of Arizona, who is currently under investigation for corrupt practices relating to his wife's business interests.

At least two more Republican congressmen face similar probes: John Doolittle of California, linked to corruption scandals involving his wife's fundraising business, Abramoff and former congressman Cunningham; and Don Young of Alaska, linked to the same bribe-and-favor scandal as Senator Stevens.

Doolittle was compelled to give up his seat on the powerful House Appropriations Committee earlier this year after the FBI raided his home, seeking evidence on the funneling of bribes through the political consulting firm run by his wife.

Democrats as well as Republicans are caught up in the bribe-taking. Congressman William Jefferson of Louisiana was indicted earlier this year on charges of extorting bribes from several US companies seeking to do business in Africa. Jefferson has been under a cloud since an FBI raid found \$90,000 in shrink-wrapped cash stored in a freezer in his basement—allegedly bribe money to be delivered by Jefferson to a Nigerian official.

When attorneys for Brent Wilkes, a defense contractor charged with bribing Congressman Cunningham, issued subpoenas last month, they included four Democrats: Norman Dicks of Washington, who sits on the

House appropriations defense subcommittee; John Murtha of Pennsylvania, chairman of that subcommittee; Ike Skelton of Missouri, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee; and Sylvestre Reyes of Texas, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Nine Republicans were subpoenaed, more than twice the number of Democrats, a proportion which reflects not any ethical difference, but the fact that by far the largest share of the loot went to the Republicans because they controlled the House from 1994 through 2006 and were in the best position to reward favored business interests.

The nine include Hastert, Doolittle and Weller; Jerry Lewis, Darrell Issa and Duncan Hunter, all of California, the last-named a Republican presidential candidate; Roy Blunt of Missouri, now minority whip; Peter Hoekstra of Michigan, ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee; and Joe Knollenberg of Michigan.

Those considered most vulnerable to charges in the Cunningham case are Doolittle, who received \$80,000 in campaign contributions from Wilkes, and Lewis, who chaired the House appropriations defense subcommittee that steered \$37 million to a Wilkes-owned company, while receiving \$60,000 in campaign contributions from the contractor.

In its latest preview of the 2008 elections, *Congressional Quarterly* suggested that at least six more Republicans could retire before the 2008 election campaign gets under way, including Doolittle, Ralph Regula and David Hobson of Ohio, John McHugh of New York, Barbara Cubin of Wyoming and C. W. Young of Florida. By contrast, only two of the 233 members of the Democratic majority are planning to leave the House, both of them seeking to move up to the Senate by capturing vulnerable Republican seats.

There are many factors underlying the evident disintegration of the Republican congressional caucus, including personal problems such as age and health, demoralization after the loss of control of both houses last year, and fear that the growing popular hostility to the war in Iraq will produce an electoral debacle in 2008.

Two factors are particularly significant, however, since they demonstrate that powerful sections of the financial aristocracy have decided to make a shift to the Democrats, the other major bourgeois party, as their preferred instrument of rule.

The first is the role of the state itself in triggering the shift in the political balance in Congress. Corruption probes, largely focused on Republicans, played a major role in the loss of the House in 2006: the bribery conviction and resignation of Randy Cunningham; the conviction and resignation of Robert Ney of Ohio, a key figure in the Abramoff scandal; the resignation of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, after his indictment on charges of illegal campaign contributions in Texas; and the resignation of Mark Foley over charges that he solicited sex with male House pages and former pages.

Such probes have long been manipulated by the ruling elite to accomplish changes in its Washington personnel without the uncertainties of elections—a process which is well under way this year. Details of the investigations into Senator Stevens and Senator Craig were leaked to the press by police officials and the FBI, and the FBI carried out well-publicized raids on the homes or offices of Senator Stevens and congressmen Doolittle and Renzi.

Hand-in-hand with these investigations has come a pronounced shift in corporate fundraising from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Both the Senate and House Democratic campaign committees have out-raised their Republican counterparts, an unprecedented reversal of fortune given the longtime Republican lead in campaign contributions from business.

The fundraising lead is substantial: for the Senate, the Democratic committee raised \$36.7 million for the first eight months of the year, compared to \$20.5 million for the Republicans, and the Democrats had a three-to-one advantage in cash on hand, even though the Republicans must defend 22 seats compared to only 12 for the Democrats. In nearly

every House seat that seems likely to be closely contested next year, the Democrats have raised more money than ever before and in most cases more money than their Republican opponents.

The financial advantage reflects not growing popular support for the Democrats, but a shift in the calculations of the financial oligarchy. The Democratic Senate Campaign Committee collected 57 percent of its donations in increments of \$20,000 or more, up from 31 percent of contributions four years ago, and substantially more than its Republican counterpart.

Statistics released in August by the Federal Election Commission showed that in the first six months of 2007, Democratic Party committees raised \$111.5 million, up 29 percent from the same period in 2005 and a staggering 98 percent from the first half of 2003. The figures for the corresponding Republican committees dropped by one-quarter compared to the first half of 2005.

There are several important political conclusions to be drawn from these political shifts. First and foremost is the deeply corroded character of American democracy. While the American people will cast their votes on November 4, 2008, powerful forces within the ruling class are moving to dictate the outcome more than a year beforehand.

While the presidency remains in question—although the Democrats have a considerable lead both in the polls and in fundraising—the shape of the next Congress has already been basically decided. Barring a political upheaval from below—or a major new “terror” provocation on the scale of 9/11—the Democrats will increase their margin in the Senate significantly, and make gains in the House as well.

The shift to the Democrats represents an effort by the ruling elite to preempt the growing opposition to the war in Iraq, which brought the Democrats back to power last November, as well as the mass discontent with stagnant or declining living standards, deteriorating social conditions, and the impact of the mounting financial crisis.

The American ruling elite is responding to this deepening political unrest in two ways: it brings forward the Democratic Party to present a more “caring” face to the population and foster illusions that the existing political structure can respond to mass discontent; and it builds up the forces of repression in anticipation of the day when it becomes necessary to confront the social anger of millions of people directly.

It is noteworthy that the months of July and August, which saw the congressional Republicans essentially throwing in the towel on their electoral prospects next year, coincided with a sharp swing to the right among the congressional Democrats and the Democratic presidential candidates, particularly on war in Iraq and the repressive measures labeled as “anti-terrorist.”

The Democratic Party was acting to reassure the ruling class that it can be trusted with power and will act “responsibly” on these critical issues—i.e., that it will do what is necessary to defend the interests of American imperialism, both at home and abroad.

A victory of the Democratic Party in the 2008 elections will do nothing to advance the interests of working people. It will only serve to transfer political authority from the Republicans, now exhausted, demoralized and discredited, to the other political party of the corporate-financial aristocracy, which has been held in reserve for precisely this task.



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