

Alaska Republican senator renominated despite indictment

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One of the most powerful Republicans in the US Senate, Ted Stevens of Alaska, won renomination in the state Republican primary August 26, four weeks after he was indicted on charges of concealing lavish gifts from an oil services company when he filed disclosure reports with the Senate required under the Ethics in Government Act.

Stevens, 84, has been a US Senator since he was appointed to fill a vacancy in 1968. He won renomination by 63 percent, but trails in the polls against his Democratic opponent, Mark Begich, the mayor of Anchorage.

The likely ouster of Stevens brings to at least five the number of US Senate seats that the Democratic Party is expected to gain in the November elections. Democratic candidates are heavily favored to win three seats where Republican senators are retiring, in Virginia, New Mexico and Colorado, while Democratic challengers are leading in the polls against incumbent Republican senators in Alaska and New Hampshire, and competitive in Oregon, Minnesota, Mississippi and North Carolina. Only one Democratic seat, in Louisiana, is considered at risk.

The case against Stevens is part of a broad corruption probe that has targeted much of the Republican Party establishment in Alaska. Governor Sarah Palin—now selected as the vice-presidential running mate of John McCain—defeated the incumbent governor, Frank Murkowski, in the Republican primary two years ago in large measure because of Murkowski's ties to the scandal. Palin was previously a political unknown, the part-time mayor of the town of Wasilla, before Murkowski appointed her to a position on the state's powerful oil industry regulatory authority.

The gifts received by Stevens included improvements worth several hundred thousand dollars to his home in Girdwood, Alaska, kitchen appliances and other furnishings as well as a new Land Rover. The company, VECO Corp., repeatedly sent employees to Stevens's house to carry out repairs and construction, including jacking up the entire house so that a new ground floor could be built. The company also hired one of Stevens's sons for a management position.

In return for these payoffs, Stevens was an ardent advocate of VECO's interests, both within Alaska and internationally. In 1999, he earmarked \$2.5 million in Labor Department funds to

bring Russian oilfield workers to Alaska for training, an effort to assist VECO build up its oil and gas exploration work on Sakhalin Island in Russia's Far East. He also put pressure on the government of Pakistan, which was in dispute with VECO over payments for oil pipeline work in that country.

He has responded to the indictment by seeking to have the charges suppressed, claiming that they violated the "speech and debate" clause of the Constitution, which makes congressmen and senators immune from executive branch prosecution for their legislative actions.

The indictment, however, does not relate to legislative acts, such as the earmark for VECO, but to Stevens using his influence with the Bush administration and the Alaska state government to further the company's interests. During the period in question Ben Stevens, the senator's oldest son, was the Republican leader of the Alaska state senate.

VECO chairman Bill Allen pleaded guilty early this year on charges of bribing state and local officials, including \$250,000 in cash bribes to Ben Stevens. He is expected to be a star witness against Ted Stevens as well, although the senator is not actually charged with bribery, but with failure to disclose (similar to the famous prosecution of mobster Al Capone, on charges not of racketeering, but for failure to pay income taxes on his illegal earnings).

Senator Stevens demanded an early trial and sought to have it held in Alaska, in a transparent effort to rig the outcome, since every sitting federal judge in Alaska owes his appointment to the senator. A federal judge in the District of Columbia ruled against him, however, and the trial is now set to begin in Washington September 24.

A second long-serving legislator, Congressman Don Young, was locked in a tight primary contest, as he led his main challenger, Lieutenant Governor Sean Parnell, by barely 100 votes out of more than 80,000 cast. Young has also been linked to the VECO scandal, which has embroiled much of the state's Republican establishment, but he has not yet been indicted. Several thousand absentee ballots remain to be counted and the second-place candidate will undoubtedly seek a recount.

A VECO executive who pleaded guilty to bribery charges testified that part of his job was to arrange annual fundraisers for Young. The Democratic-controlled Congress also approved

a resolution this year asking the Justice Department to investigate a \$10 million earmark Young put into a 2005 highway appropriations bill, funding the construction of a freeway interchange in Florida that benefited a business crony. The construction of the interchange had been opposed by local government officials in Florida, only to find it secretly inserted into the bill by a congressman from Alaska.

Lieutenant Governor Parnell waged an extreme-right campaign against Young, focusing on his role as a dispenser of pork-barrel spending in his capacity as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. Alaska Governor Sarah Palin encouraged Parnell to challenge Young out of concern that the incumbent would otherwise be defeated by Democrat Ethan Berkowitz, a former state legislator. No such concerted effort was made to replace Stevens, who was not indicted until after the filing date for the primary.

The Republican Party has held all three of Alaska's federal seats—two in the Senate, one in the House of Representatives—for the last 28 years. Now, unless Stevens wins acquittal at his corruption trial, set for September 24, it is widely expected that both Republican candidates will be defeated on November 5.

The upheaval in the Republican Party in Alaska is only one element in a far broader crisis, with numerous Republican senators and congressmen retiring rather than seek reelection and Republican congressional leaders admitting that the result of the fall voting will be substantially increased Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress.

The Democrats presently control the Senate by a 51-49 margin, thanks to the support of two independents, one of whom, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, is a fervent supporter of Republican presidential candidate John McCain. The Democratic Party would have to gain nine seats to reach the 60 votes required to shut off debate and end filibusters.

In the Senate, where 35 seats (out of 100) are on the ballot November 5, the Republicans must defend 23 and the Democrats only 12, making significant Democratic gains a virtual certainty. In the House of Representatives, where all 435 seats are at stake in November, the Democrats also have a built-in edge because more than two dozen Republican incumbents are retiring, compared to only a handful of Democrats.

In special elections during the spring to fill three vacancies, Democratic candidates won seats long held by Republicans in rural districts in Louisiana, Mississippi and Illinois, increasing their margin to 236-199. This margin is now predicted to increase by 10 to 20 additional seats, with Republican congressmen in New England, New York, Ohio and Michigan considered most at risk, because of widespread popular anger over the war in Iraq, the economic crisis and the overall record of the Bush administration.

The effective concession of the congressional elections by the Republican Party forms an important part of the background to the presidential campaign, since a victory by Senator Barack

Obama would give the Democratic Party control of both the legislative and executive branches of the federal government for the first time since 1993-1994, and only the second time since 1980.

Congressional Democratic leaders have already begun to express alarm at the prospect that a sweeping electoral victory could raise popular expectations for action over such burning social issues as health care, jobs, aid to blighted urban areas and education. They have been at pains to reassure their big business backers that an increased Democratic majority in the next Congress will be a reliable defender of corporate interests and will engage in no significant social reform effort.

An article in the *Washington Post* August 28 cited concern on the part of the congressional Democratic leadership over their likely electoral success: "Their enthusiasm is tempered by some Democrats' caution against overreaching for fear that an agenda geared too much to the party's most liberal elements could make the 2010 elections a repeat of 1994, when Democrats were exiled from power on Capitol Hill for 12 years."

The *Post* continued that, according to the Democratic congressional leaders, the "lessons of 1993" were that the newly elected Clinton administration was too ambitious, seeking to enact "tax increases, universal health care ... and new gun controls. Democrats lost control of Congress the next year in a wave of voter discontent and anger."

The Democratic rout in 1994, however, was due not to some excess of reformist zeal on the part of the Clinton administration—the most conservative Democratic administration of the 20th century—but to its failure to enact health care reform or in any way improve the conditions of life for millions of working people.

In espousing such an absurd distortion of the history of the 1990s, the congressional Democratic leadership is advertising in advance its determination to play an even more reactionary role after January 20, 2009, regardless of whether Barack Obama or John McCain is inaugurated as the next president.

The incoming Congress will be under Democratic Party control, and it will be fully committed to the right-wing agenda of the American ruling elite—extension of imperialist military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, a further transfer of resources from social programs to the Pentagon, the defense of economic inequality and corporate domination at home, and intensified attacks on democratic rights.



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