

Two US senators quit reelection race: Democratic Party in crisis

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Two leading US Senate Democrats announced Tuesday and Wednesday that they would not seek reelection this year. Combined with similar statements by the Democratic governor of Colorado and the leading Democratic candidate for governor of Michigan, the withdrawals demonstrate the mounting crisis of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota announced Tuesday that he would not seek reelection to a fourth term, and Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut followed suit 24 hours later, pulling out of a reelection campaign that had been under way for nearly six months.

Dodd, a five-term senator and chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, was one of the most powerful and best-financed incumbents. Considered a liberal in US terms, he was closely allied with Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, although less well-known. His 2008 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination floundered from the start and he dropped out after the first contest, the Iowa caucuses.

Over the past year, Dodd gained notoriety for his close ties to banking and insurance interests and his leading role in the government bailout of Wall Street at the expense of working people. He is currently engaged in drafting a financial regulation bill that will provide few noticeable, let alone significant, changes in the speculative operations of the stock and money markets.

Dodd was exposed last year as the senator who surreptitiously inserted a clause in the \$700 billion bailout bill, authorizing continued payment of million-dollar bonuses to executives at AIG, the huge US insurer that helped trigger the financial collapse through its speculation in derivatives markets.

AIG received \$160 billion in federal bailout funds, much of that consisting of a backdoor subsidy to investment banks like Goldman Sachs, which had extensive dealings in which AIG was the counterparty. Dodd received the maximum campaign contribution, \$2,100 apiece, from 31 executives of AIG's derivatives unit, which is headquartered in Wilton,

Connecticut, including the head of AIG Financial Products, Joseph Cassano.

Dodd was also linked to the failed Countrywide Financial home lender, designated by CEO Angelo Mozilo as a "friend of Angelo," entitling him to a home loan at sweetheart rates.

Democratic Party consultants interpreted Dodd's withdrawal from the race as a preemptive move to hold the Senate seat for the party. He was trailing one Republican challenger, former congressman and CIA agent Rob Simmons, in opinion polls, and a second Republican, Linda McMahon, co-owner of the World Wrestling Association, was prepared to spend \$50 million in her personal funds against him.

State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, the top Democratic statewide official, immediately announced he would seek the nomination to replace Dodd, and initial polls showed him as heavily favored to win. Connecticut has not elected a Republican to the US Senate since 1982, and the seat Dodd holds has been in Democratic hands since 1962.

The retirement of Dorgan in North Dakota had no such silver lining for the Democrats, who are effectively conceding the race if Governor John Hoeven, as expected, becomes the Republican candidate. The state's lone member of the House of Representatives, Democrat Earl Pomeroy, quickly declined to enter the Senate contest.

Dorgan, like Dodd, is a member of the Senate Democratic leadership, serving as head of the Democratic Policy Committee, as well as chairing the committee on Indian (Native American) affairs. He has been in the Senate since 1992. The Democrats have held both of North Dakota's Senate seats for the past 24 years.

The two candidates for governor who pulled out this week were both projected to lose badly, according to current polls. Colorado Governor Bill Ritter won an easy first-term election in 2006, and was touted as a rising star, serving as host in Denver to the Democratic National Convention that nominated Barack Obama for president in 2008.

In Michigan, Lieutenant Governor John Cherry was the

frontrunner for the Democratic nomination to succeed the two-term governor, Democrat Jennifer Granholm, who cannot run again. He was trailing badly in the polls against several potential Republican candidates, in a state where the unemployment rate is nearly 15 percent.

The four withdrawals follow the announced retirements last fall of several long-serving Democrats in the House of Representatives, and the party switch last month by Congressman Parker Griffith of Alabama, a conservative Democrat who went over to the Republican minority.

These actions testify to the widespread mood of apprehension, verging on panic, in Democratic Party circles, in the face of the plunging popularity of the Obama administration and its failure to reverse the rising tide of unemployment. The consensus in Washington is that the Democrats will lose a significant part of their current 60-40 Senate majority and could even lose control of the House of Representatives, which would require a 40-seat gain by the Republicans.

The election is unlikely to end Democratic control of the US Senate, since only one-third of the seats are at stake, and of the 34 seats up for a vote, 18 are held by Republicans and 16 by Democrats. The Republican Party would need a net gain of 11 seats to reach a 51-vote majority. But loss of the current 60-vote Democratic majority, the exact number required to halt a filibuster, is nearly certain.

With the withdrawal of Dodd and Dorgan, the Democrats must now defend four open seats in the Senate, plus two others held by unelected appointees, while the Republicans have five seats opened up by retirement. In the House of Representatives, more Republicans than Democrats are retiring and leaving open seats, which are more likely to change hands.

Many factors can still affect the outcome of the elections, still ten months away, and Corporate America is still betting on the Democrats to maintain control, and directing its campaign contributions accordingly. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has raised \$18 million more for the 2010 election than its Republican counterpart, according to figures compiled by the Federal Election Commission through the end of November.

Because the US political system effectively blocks any political movement outside the two officially recognized right-wing parties, the growing popular hostility to the Obama administration's right-wing course finds expression, paradoxically, in improved electoral prospects for the Republicans.

This is not due to any growth in support for the ultra-right program of the Republican Party. On the contrary, generic polling numbers for the Republicans are even lower now than during the 2006 and 2008 election campaigns, when the

party lost control of both houses of Congress and then the presidency.

Both the Democratic capture of Congress and Obama's victory in 2008 were the result of an influx of tens of millions of working class voters, with unprecedented turnout among young people, African Americans and Hispanics, and a sizeable swing against the Republicans among sections of middle class voters as well. The Democrats profited from popular hostility to the war in Iraq and to the economic slump brought on by the Wall Street crash of September-October 2008.

The policies pursued by Obama since taking office—continuing and expanding the bailout of Wall Street, while rejecting any measures for direct job creation to assist the millions of unemployed, escalating the war in Afghanistan and continuing the occupation in Iraq, and extending the Bush administration's assault on democratic rights—have alienated millions of those who voted for him little more than a year ago.

The principal social reform promised by Obama during the 2008 campaign, the expansion of health care coverage for tens of millions of uninsured, has been transformed over the past year into a reactionary exercise in cost-cutting for Medicare recipients and financial windfalls for the insurance industry and drug companies.

As a result, the turnout among former Obama voters is projected to plunge, as millions, denied any alternative, simply stay home. Meanwhile, the Republican Party will mobilize its far-right base while seeking to capitalize on the confusion and disillusionment among working class and middle class people over the speedy shelving of the demagogic promises of "hope" and "change."



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