

US: The millionaires' Congress

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26 November 2010

Members of US Congress increased their combined personal wealth by more than 16 percent from 2008 and 2009, even as the population they nominally represent was going through the worst wave of job losses and wage cutting since the Great Depression.

According to an analysis of financial disclosures by the Center for Responsive Politics, just under half of the US Senators and Representatives, 261 of 535, were millionaires in 2009, compared to 1 percent of the population at large. Fifty-five of these Congressmen have a net worth of greater than \$10 million, and eight have fortunes estimated at over \$100 million.

Median wealth for all members of Congress in 2009 was \$911,510, up from \$785,515 in 2008. In the “people’s House,” the median net worth was \$765,010 in 2009, up from \$645,503 in 2008, considerably below, however, the \$2.38 million median net wealth for US Senators in 2009, which was up from \$2.27 million in 2008.

These figures, if anything, are underestimations. Congressmen are only required to report their assets in a broad range—the Center for Responsive Politics works out an average based on this range—and they are not obliged to include their residences.

The richest member of Congress in 2009 was Rep. Darrell Issa, a right-wing California Republican, whose net worth was estimated at \$303.5 million for 2009, an increase of 21 percent in one year. He was followed by another representative from California, Jane Harman, the pro-war, pro-CIA Democrat, whose wealth increased by 19 percent to \$293.4 million, and Democratic Senator and former presidential candidate John Kerry of Massachusetts, whose wealth—gained by marrying the widow-heiress of the Heinz Ketchup fortune—was estimated at \$238.8 million, up 14.3 percent in one year.

Sen. Mark Warner (D-Virginia), Rep. Jared Polis (D-Colorado), Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wisconsin), Rep.

Vernon Buchanan (R-Florida) and Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas) were the other lawmakers whose wealth was estimated to be greater than \$100 million in 2009.

There was no appreciable difference between the income levels of Democrats and Republicans. “Overall, party affiliation appeared to play little discernable role in predicting an increase in the value of lawmakers’ personal assets: 12 Democrats and seven Republicans ranked among the top 20 congressmen whose average wealth increased by the greatest percentage between 2008 and 2009,” the report notes. “That’s roughly proportional with Congress’ partisan makeup.”

The outgoing Democratic Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, had assets estimated at about \$60 million (far more than her Republican successor, John Boehner, who had *only* \$3.5 million). Unlike many members of Congress, Pelosi listed her home (and vineyard) as an asset, estimating it to be worth as much as \$15 million. Her investment portfolio is a veritable who’s who of major corporations, among them AT&T, Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Alcoa, Apple, Dow Chemical, and Motorola, to name only a handful.

Indeed, the report documents not only the wealth of the legislators, but their financial interests in the largest corporations and banks. Eighty-two members of Congress are invested in General Electric, followed by Bank of America (63), Cisco Systems (61), Proctor & Gamble (61) and Microsoft (54), Exxon Mobil (46), Wells Fargo (45), Berkshire Hathaway (44), Apple (42), IBM (41), Johnson & Johnson (39), JPMorgan Chase (38), Coca-Cola (39), PepsiCo (36), Wal-Mart (28) and Goldman Sachs (27).

When these firms call on legislators on Capitol Hill, they are not so much lobbying as meeting with prominent shareholders.

BP, the London-based oil giant whose profit-driven recklessness resulted in the greatest environmental

disaster in US history, was invested in by 24 members of Congress, paced by John Kerry, who had BP assets estimated in value somewhere between \$351,000 and \$765,000.

Sixty-four members of congress had assets in Pfizer, the largest US pharmaceutical, and 80 reported significant transactions with the firm. The pharmaceuticals, insurance giants, and HMOs were well served by their Congressional investors in regard to the Obama administration's health care "reform." The measures passed will guarantee the profits of the major industry players for years to come, while relegating the vast majority of the population to a segregated, second-tier health care system.

The wealth data provide part of the explanation as to why Congress has failed to take any steps to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of millions of Americans. The ladies and gentlemen of the House and Senate are members in good standing of a social layer far, far removed from the growing misery experienced by wide layers of the population.

"Few federal lawmakers must grapple with the financial ills—unemployment, loss of housing, wiped out savings—that have befallen millions of Americans," commented Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, in a consummate understatement. "Congressional representatives on balance rank among the wealthiest of wealthy Americans and boast financial portfolios that are all but unattainable for most of their constituents."

But it is not merely a question of insensitivity. The statistics lift the curtain on a political class that is flesh of the flesh of the financial aristocracy. When Congressmen support policies that benefit the elite—e.g., the Wall Street bailout or the maintenance of tax cuts for the rich—they are not only serving their powerful clients, but themselves.



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