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Voters Keep Re-electing Congressional Losers

By Joel S. Hirschhorn

Voting out congressional incumbents failed this year, showing the anti-incumbency movement to be a clear letdown. For some years many groups and their websites have been advocating voting out congressional incumbents as an effective means to reform government and make it work better. Two of the better ones are Vote Out Incumbents Democracy and Tenure Corrupts.

Congress' average seat retention rate since 1855 is 95.4 percent. There was a 3.6 percent decrease in seat retention in Congress from 99.2 percent in 2004 to 95.6 percent in 2006. But this modest improvement was aimed mostly at Republican incumbents, when what is really needed is a bipartisan approach.

Considering the totally awful public approval of Congress you would think that 2008 would be an historic year for voting out congressional incumbents, especially because it is so easy to blame both Democrats and Republicans for the nation's woes. Moreover, public interest in [politics](#) and this year's general [election](#) were higher than in a long time. And the [Internet](#) is awash with passionate statements against incumbents of both parties. So, how have Americans just behaved? How did congressional incumbents do this year?

This year the retention rate was typical at 95.6 percent overall (and unlikely to change significantly when some unsettled races get resolved). Likewise, though most incumbent Republicans were reelected, out of just 20 incumbent seats lost, only one was for a Democrat. Need proof of just how little political competition there is? Consider uncontested House seats that incumbents did not even have to defend, including 32 Democrats and 12 Republicans that did not face a two-party challenger.

As usual, no third-party congressional candidate was elected, with just a few able to hit around 20 percent, mostly when there was only a Democrat to run against, while in the vast majority of cases they stayed in low single digits. In the presidential [vote](#) category it looks like just 1.6 million people voted for third-party candidates, compared to 1.2 million in 2004 - not much of an improvement.

In other words, we have once again witnessed the pendulum-effect, where voters may feel strong anti-incumbency sentiments but in only a few cases express them as voting in candidates of the "other" party. So power shifts, but the corrupt status quo two-party system remains.

While I have agreed with the motivations of those leading the anti-incumbency movement I have concluded that there is something so rotten about our political system that there will never be a sufficiently large anti-incumbency [vote](#) to have any real impact. This year proves my point.

In the larger picture, the anti-incumbency movement merely serves as a distraction from more sensible approaches for reforming and revitalizing American democracy. It is just another of a seemingly endless array of ineffective and marginalized political reform movements. Until American patriots and dissidents unite behind something a lot more powerful the two-party plutocracy will remain in power.

The core problem is that the public has been thoroughly brainwashed to believe in the two-party system. One major consequence is that they refuse to [vote](#) for third-party candidates, so that even when they see what is tragic about our politicians they think the solution as voting for a challenger from the "other" major party. This happens despite the high fraction of voters registered as independents.

The anti-incumbency movement could only be successful if it was truly bipartisan so that voters

rejected not only ALL incumbent Democrats and Republicans, but also refused to elect new members to Congress from BOTH major parties. Merely shifting control of Congress from one of the major [parties](#) to the other has never worked effectively. Why? Simple, both major [parties](#) have been corrupted by the same corporate and other special interests that pervert public policies to serve them rather than the general public.

The problem is that we still do not have effective political competition in a nation that prides itself about competition. The two-party duopoly and plutocracy has worked hard to block true political competition. When it comes to congressional elections, gerrymandering has been used as a potent weapon. Gerrymandering of districts by both major [parties](#) when they have the power to accomplish it has not only protected incumbents, it has also made it nearly impossible for third party congressional candidates that are on a huge number of ballots to be successful.

Nelson Lee Walker of Tenure Corrupts recently made these sage observations: "I'm coming around to the idea that the bulk of the American people are basically stupid, stupid, stupid! Why? How else can we explain how Congress, which has a 9% approval rating, gets reelected about 95% of the time? Do we ever "throw the bums out"? Listen to these stats: Senate: As of 2008, of 100 Senators, 39 (39%) reelected for 18 yrs or more, 4 over 40 years! House: As of 2008, of 435 members, 143 (33%) reelected for 14 yrs or more, 5 over 36 years! And the longer these guys are in office, the more of them will run unopposed in future elections, since nobody will bother to challenge them. Unopposed races have doubled in the last 20 years, from 40 to 80 seats. And who is responsible for this sad state of affairs? YOU!!! Not your dumb neighbor. Not the media. Not the crooked political system. Just YOU, the typical stupid American! The guy who complains how those crooked politicians are ripping off the country and sending us all down the tubes, and then reelects them!"

In this of all years these critical views are hard to dispute. After all, could it be any clearer that the anti-incumbency movement is a failure? I urge those who have put so much time and energy into the anti-incumbency movement to call it quits and devote themselves to strategies that may be more effective. One option is to work hard to form a new national third party. Another is to support the relatively new nonpartisan attempt by Friends of the Article V Convention at www.foavc.org to compel Congress to give Americans what they have a constitutional right to have and what has been requested by the required number of states, and what the Founders believed we would need when the public lost trust and confidence in the federal government: an Article V convention that could consider proposals for constitutional amendments, a number of which could truly reform the structure of our dysfunctional political system.

For too long Congress has refused to obey the Constitution and we "dumb" Americans have let them get away with it, in large part because both Democrats and Republicans have feared (and instilled fear about) such a convention. The same people that keep getting elected to Congress! How's that for symmetrical infamy?

[Contact Joel S. Hirschhorn through www.delusionaldemocracy.com.]