



Analysis: Incumbents fine, establishment hurting

By DAVID ESPO

AP Special Correspondent

June 11, 2010

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Midway through a tumultuous primary season, incumbents are doing just fine, thank you. It's the larger political establishment that's bearing the brunt of voter anger.

Organized labor, a permanent part of the Democratic establishment, lurches from defeat to high profile defeat. It failed to save party-switching Sen. Arlen Specter in Pennsylvania, then poured millions into a losing effort to oust Arkansas Sen. Blanche Lincoln, a challenge meant to send a vote-with-us-or-else warning to party moderates everywhere.

"I know you're angry at Washington," said the incumbent, who won renomination in part by telling the voters she was working for them, not for the unions - a lesson for other incumbents.

Anti-incumbency shows up far more often in the polls than at the ballot box, where all but two of 217 House members seeking new terms have won renomination. Campaign cash, staff, name identification and the party apparatus add up to the power of incumbency.

By contrast, the decentralized, year-old tea party movement moves from success to high-profile success without a cohesive nationwide infrastructure, an imposing headquarters building a few blocks from the White House or the deep pockets of labor.

Tea party activists sent Republican Sen. Bob Bennett packing in Utah for the same general offense that earned Lincoln the wrath of labor - working across party lines now and again, and failing a test of ideological purity.

Next, tea party activists humbled Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell at home, rejecting his hand-picked senatorial hopeful in Kentucky in favor of Rand Paul, a first-time candidate with libertarian views.

They have had setbacks, but because of the tea partiers' energy and money, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist bolted the Republican Party and now runs for the Senate as an independent. Former GOP Rep. Rob Simmons is on the sidelines of a Senate primary campaign he

once led in Connecticut. And the leadership's favored Nevada senatorial hopeful will be a spectator this fall, not a candidate.

Republican establishment officials react to each defeat with a rhetorical pivot, insisting that the candidates they didn't initially favor will lead the GOP to victory in the fall. "Sharron Angle offers a fresh perspective and new leadership for Nevada, untainted by the special interests and backroom dealmaking that have been a hallmark of Harry Reid's time in Washington," Texas Sen. John Cornyn, head of the Republican senatorial committee, said after Tuesday's primary.

Little noted in all the upheaval is that with an exception or two, the loudest tea party uprisings have come in Republican primaries without incumbents on the ballot. Angle's come-from-behind senatorial success in Nevada; Marco Rubio's rise in Florida, and Linda McMahon's surge in Connecticut are among them.

Nikki Haley's first-place finish over three male rivals in last week's South Carolina gubernatorial primary; Paul LePage's win in the Maine primary and Paul's nomination in Kentucky round out the top half-dozen.

So far, four lawmakers have been tossed, along with Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons, whose messy divorce might have wearied voters in any year.

The congressional casualty list includes the Democratic Specter, Bennett, and Reps. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va., and Parker Griffith, R-Ala.

It's an unremarkable total by House standards, noticeable but hardly shocking for the Senate.

According to the office of the House Historian, three incumbents lost primaries in 2008, and two each in 2006 and 2004. There were eight in 2002, a total swelled by the once-a-decade redistricting that forced incumbents into races against one another.

Records kept by the Secretary of the Senate show that only two senators lost primaries in the past decade. One of them, Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, recovered to win a new term as an independent.

A far more serious anti-incumbency tide could sweep many more members of Congress and governors in the fall, depending on the economy, the breadth of the tea party appeal, President Barack Obama's standing and more, although more than 40 lawmakers have no party opposition this fall.

Two of this year's rejects, Specter and Griffith, switched parties, a move that often suggests a politician has worn out a welcome with the voters who helped them in the past.

Specter then was caught on videotape saying he had switched to save his career, a self-serving calculation arguably best unspoken in any political environment, much less the shadow of the worst unemployment in decades.

The White House also dangled a part-time government position in front of Specter's challenger in hopes he would drop out.

Instead, Rep. Joe Sestak rejected the overture, boasted publicly about it, and ran a commercial about the episode, effectively stamping his ticket as an outsider in a year of voter fury with the establishment.

In South Carolina, Haley stood down claims of extramarital affairs and outmaneuvered an entire phalanx of establishment Republicans. With tea party support, she won nearly half the votes in a race that included a four-term congressman, the lieutenant governor and her state's attorney general, and leads the way into a June 22 runoff. As badly as the Republican Party regulars fared, it could have been worse. Just ask South Carolina's Democratic establishment.

Primary voters cast nearly 60 percent of their ballots for Alvin Greene, who is out of work, waged no visible campaign and is unknown to political leaders.

Unfortunately, perhaps, he is known to the police, and faces a felony charge for allegedly showing obscene Internet photos to a University of South Carolina student. He says he is innocent.

Establishment Democrats, raising the possibility of skullduggery, want state and federal authorities to investigate how an unemployed man could come up with the \$10,000 needed to file candidacy papers.

They might also wonder what caused 99,970 South Carolina Democrats to vote for him.