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Out-of-office experience

Voters hesitate to elect those who took a break from politics

By Joshua Spivak

It's looking increasingly likely that Republicans will select a presidential candidate who is not currently an officeholder. But a look at history reveals that the American people are not enamored of electing out-of-office candidates. By limiting themselves to people who aren't in the daily political battlefield, the Republicans may be harming their chances of success in November 2012.

Voters' anti-incumbent sentiment accounts for much of the reason Republicans are lacking office-holding candidates. The 2010 election was noted for its intense anti-incumbent fervor. It wasn't just that the Democrats were swept out of office in near-record numbers in the House. The real surprise was the strong moves against Republican incumbents. In state after state, Republican incumbents or elected officials seeking to move up were defeated by barely known, sometimes very flawed insurgents. Utah Sen. Bob Bennett lost the party's nomination, as did Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who won the election regardless by running as a write-in candidate. Delaware Rep. Mike Castle was defeated in the primaries in his search for the Senate by tea party candidate Christine O'Donnell. Similar upsets played out in Nevada, New York, Colorado and Florida.

This anti-incumbent fervor has already had a significant impact on the 2012 nomination process. For the first time since 1904, no sitting U.S. senator is seeking the party's nomination. And with only two sitting governors, Indiana's Mitch Daniels and Mississippi's Haley Barbour, and two representatives, Michelle Bachman and Ron Paul, even being discussed as candidates, it is very likely that, for the first time since 1984, a major-party presidential nominee will not be a sitting officeholder.

Since Walter Mondale, the former vice president, won the Democratic nomination that year, the nominees have included three presidents seeking re-election, two vice presidents looking to move up, four senators and three governors. Bob Dole, the 1996 Republican nominee, resigned from the Senate as a campaign tactic, but that was only after he had the nomination sewn up. Even the vice presidents have been chosen from officeholders — only two of them, Jack Kemp and Dick Cheney, were not holding office when selected. In fact, in the 20th century, only four presidents were not holding elective or appointive office when they were nominated: Eisenhower (who was still supreme commander of NATO), Nixon, Carter and Reagan.

Being an officeholder has always had its negatives; such candidates are tied down to a job and will receive heavy criticism for missing big votes. But the major difficulty for elected officials seeking the presidency is that they, especially legislators, are frequently forced to take a stand on a range of hot-button issues of the day. During a typical congressional session, a lawmaker casts well-publicized votes on health care, abortion, gun control or the environment. This has always been a problem and may be one of several reasons why governors, who can go through their entire terms without having to take a stand on most controversial issues, have

historically had a much easier time winning the presidency. Conversely, only three sitting U.S. senators have ever won the presidency.

This drawback, which is a tactical inconvenience in most years, has become a huge negative in 2012. Core Republican voters have taken a microscope to candidates' records, scorning historically solid Republican incumbents who voted in favor of the bank bailout, spending or tax increases, or indicated past support for the health care reform plan. Putative Republican front-runner Mitt Romney is running as far and as fast away from his Massachusetts health plan as possible.

This is not to say the Republican candidates lack high-ranking electoral experience. But most of their experience ends before the financial crash of 2008, avoiding the big political battles over budgets, bailouts, health care and spending that have rocked the country. Since the majority of the possible top-tier candidates were governors, they also managed to avoid taking a real stand on foreign-policy matters.

Having candidates with a light footprint does have its positive side, as the success of Barack Obama (four years in the Senate) and George W. Bush (six years as arguably the least powerful state chief executive in the country) shows. However, they were in office when elected. The anti-incumbency weapon that has been a hallmark of the Republicans' recent success may be a double-edged sword when it comes to choosing a candidate for the presidency.