

UPSIDE

CONGRESS IS OUT OF TOUCH

Few Elected Officials Are From Industry

By Michael C. Maibach

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White only two members of the current U.S. House of Representatives are physicians, an amazing number of doctors -36- are running for Congress this year. Clearly, health care reform has gotten their attention as Washington threatens to turn their business into a public utility.

Corporate managers also face an ever-enlarging, expensive and stultifying government. From 1950 to 1990, the number of Federal Register pages skyrocketed 600 percent, while the population grew 60 percent. Government expenditures as a percent of GNP rose from 10 percent in 1929 to 40 percent today, and budget deficits devour nearly half of the nation's available capital. Washington's mainframe bureaucracies regulate exports, employment, and manufacturing as if they are the problem.

Given this reality, if any group ought to feel besieged enough to run for Congress, its corporate America. But do businesspeople run? No. Today there are only three U.S. House members from major industrial firms: Amo Houghton, R-N.Y. (Corning); Bill Emerson, R-Mo. (TRW); and George Hochbrueckner, D-N.Y. (Grumman). Not one 1994 congressional candidate works for a Fortune 500 company. In fact, few salaried employees from firms of any size run for Congress. We must understand why, because once our "representatives" are in Washington, their past experiences and associations influence their priorities, opinions, and votes. And to date, too few in the nation's capital understand business realities.

Salaried workers rarely run because campaign laws favor: (1) those already in office, (2) those self-employed or working on commission, and (3) the independently wealthy. Take those 36 doctors. Virtually all are self-employed and control their hours. High incomes add to their ability to make the financial sacrifices often needed to win elections. Campaign laws provide that a person on a private payroll cannot be paid for a "40-hour work week" unless all 40 hours are worked. In contrast, an attorney, insurance broker, stockbroker, real estate agent, doctor or anyone who bills by the hour or works on a commission faces different rules. They can work one hour and campaign the rest.

Things are even more out of balance when it comes to legal treatment of those already in office. In 1992 I was one of 15 candidates running for Congress in Silicon Valley's 14th District and the only one on a private payroll. The other 14 included three sitting county supervisors and one state legislator. While the law required that I not campaign on Intel time, those already in office had no such constraint. Taxpayers, in effect, paid them to campaign for their next office! On top of this, Congress, and state legislatures recess before each election to allow for full-time campaigning. Lawmakers who make it illegal to campaign on "company time" make it legal for themselves to campaign on "government time."

This system virtually guarantees that even though 72 percent of Americans work on private payrolls, precious few with similar work experience will represent them in Congress. In 1992, a record 112 new members were elected to Congress. Of that group, 74 (66 percent) came from city, county, or state legislatures. Not one came from industry and only 11 came from services other than lawyering. We must support changes in campaign laws to level the playing field for salaried men and women who wish to run for office. Perhaps we should require those on a public payroll to live with the same requirement as those on private payrolls, i.e., no campaigning on government time.

In an era of intense global economic competition, government officials shape policies and programs that affect our nation's ability to prosper. The best way to fashion such policy is to send more individuals to Washington who have first-hand experience in competitive industries. Our challenge is to make it easier for engineers and industrial managers to join the ranks of Congress now filled with attorneys, insurance salesmen and lifetime politicians. Of course, even if we bring the laws in balance, there is one thing that no law can do: Give us the courage to get involved, get elected and change the world.

© Michael C. Maibach is the Vice President of Government Affairs for the Intel Corporation. In 1992 he was a candidate for the US Congress from Menlo Park, California. That year he was the only executive of a Fortune 500 company running for Congress. The voters demanded he stay in the private sector!