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Fixing government

Originally published March 24, 2008

This looks like a worthwhile project for anyone who wants to change the way Congress does business, regardless of party affiliation or ideological leanings: Change-Congress.org.

The website launched last week by Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig is predicated on the fairly simple idea that whomever we choose as our next president can't fix what's broken by him or herself.

The Change Congress movement seeks to root out systemic corruption in Congress by encouraging candidates, members and citizens to participate in four basic reforms: put an end to money from lobbyists or PACS; vote to end earmarks; support publicly financed campaigns and more Congressional transparency.

This election year will see more open seats in Congress since 1996, presenting an opportunity for real change if Americans get and stay involved. That doesn't mean just showing up at the polls every few years, but taking an active role in fomenting change.

Change-Congress.org is trying to pool and leverage resources from other prominent organizations who support reform, including Taxpayers for Common Sense, The Sunlight Foundation, Porkbusters, Open Secrets and others who've been doing fine investigative work to pull back the lid and expose the dirty doings of our members of Congress.

As an aside, check out Opensecrets.org for an eye-opening investigation on the many millionaires representing us in both the House and the Senate. As we all hunker down to weather the latest economic downturns, seems our elected officials have built themselves quite a cushion to buffer them from financial troubles.

It's a mixed bag of Democrats and Republicans, with presidential candidate Hillary Clinton joining the ranks of the top 10 richest senators. Of those whose income and assets qualify them as millionaires, 55 percent are in the Senate and 44 percent in the House. Millionaires represented in the rest of the population? About 1 percent.

The Change Congress project will eventually include a tracking mechanism to record who signs on and their subsequent votes on related legislation.

In his blog on The Huffington Post last Thursday, Lessig says this about the multi-tiered project:

"Let the cause of this political cycle be substantial and fundamental reform of Congress. For with an approval rating hovering in the low 20s, no other federal institution needs the renewed confidence of the people more. From the scandals involving outright bribery, to the indirect corruption of earmarks, to the pervasive and persistent skepticism born of the view that too rarely does congressional action track policy sense rather than campaign dollars, this is an institution in desperate need of change. Done right, the Net can leverage the support for that change. And get it done."

Here in Maryland, Progressive Maryland is pushing citizens to support a public campaign finance bill that the organization hopes will put elections back in the hands of voters instead of special interest groups. Similar bills failed in the past three years. Check out SB 593 and give it your support.

It's time for more Americans to lend their voices to overhauling government. Perhaps this project is one substantial step toward that goal. I encourage you to check it out, and remember the words of Thomas Jefferson: "When people fear their government, there is tyranny; when the government fears the people, there is liberty."

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