

Crisis of America's Political System: An Easy Way to Dramatically Change Congress

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There are lots of ways to change Congress that falsely appear easy, that would alter the rules and patterns of behavior if only Congress were already fixed and willing to make the changes, or if we owned the television networks, or if people could suddenly hear what they're paid good money never to hear. But I've got a way to change Congress that is actually easy.

Congress lacks leadership. There is a progressive caucus, but it has never fought for anything. It doesn't fund its members' campaigns. It doesn't withhold votes needed for passing bills. It just does rhetoric. There are committees, but they don't subpoena, they don't send the police to pick up witnesses, they don't fine witnesses who refuse to answer questions. Congress thinks oversight was an oversight. If asked to put future generations into debt to fund wars, Congress asks "Would you like a side of drones with that?" Congress doesn't want power.

But what would happen if we were to put some people in Congress who would stand up and fight like you and I would? For example: David Segal. Here's a guy who says that if we put him in Congress he will vote against any bills that fund our foreign wars, and he'll work to de-federalize the National Guard. Asked how he'll keep that up if the Democratic Party promises him a million dollars for his campaign and various other rewards for funding wars, Segal replies by describing how he'll push back:

"In Rhode Island I've tried to develop alternative structures for legislators to lean on when the leadership makes such threats. I am the lead organizer for our progressive caucus. I founded a political action committee to support members of our progressive caucus so that if funding from sources dries up at leadership's request because something was done to offend them, that we would have at least some degree of money to fall back on to help fund our campaigns nonetheless. We've run ten, twelve races relatively modestly in the last cycle and hopefully we'll be able to do something in the forthcoming cycle."

When it comes to the Citizens United ruling and limitless corporate spending on elections, Segal says he would cosponsor Rep. Donna Edwards' amendment restoring free speech to people, not corporate persons. But he also recognizes the need to work around the institution you are trying to fix. He is the only state legislator in the 50 states who has gone into his state house and proposed calling a Constitutional Convention to undo corporate personhood and the application of free speech rights to the spending of money on elections.

Asked if he would restore oversight and checks and balances, including introducing articles

of impeachment for Jay Bybee, who authored memos authorizing aggressive war, torture, and warrantless spying, Segal replied:

“Yes, of course. I don’t think it needs to be said, but yes, of course, I think that Congress should make broader use of its oversight power, something I wish had happened here around the state of Rhode Island more readily. But yes, there’s no reason to tolerate the abuses of power that defined the Bush administration.”

Segal knows what he’s up against, but he would bring into Congress something it has been lacking:

“I’m an organizer at heart and I don’t go into this naively and think that as a freshman legislator at the federal level you can just go around and wrangle all of your longer-standing colleagues and get them to do something different than they have done before. But my goal, if I get elected, is to be an organizer to help build solidarities among members and help strengthen the Progressive Caucus so that it can stand stronger up against leadership when it comes to war funding, when it comes to health care, and so on.”

Can David Segal do this? Well, the First Congressional District of Rhode Island is going to elect a Democrat to Congress in November, that’s guaranteed, and it won’t be the incumbent, who is retiring. There are four candidates in the Democratic Primary, which is not until September 14th. It doesn’t take a high percentage to win a four-way race. And almost nobody votes in primaries, so not many people have to be reached. Rhode Island is also a tiny little place, and we’re only talking about half of it, so not too much ground has to be covered. Segal is an organizer with an impressive team already on the ground. What he needs is money, and yours spends just as well in Rhode Island as anybody else’s, and is better spent there than in your own district where the choices range from Tweedledum to Tweedledimwit.

I know that you think the weak link is in the Senate, not the House. But oversight is done just as well (or poorly) from either side of the hill. Blocking bills that damage our country is most easily done in the House, and the Senate is not needed at all. And nobody like Segal is running for the Senate. Backing lousy Senate candidates against really really lousy Senate candidates is nice. Putting a progressive activist into the House would be game-changing. Moving the debate to the left would mean dragging the Senate partway in that direction. Allowing the right to monopolize the microphone cancels out most of the advantage of electing new mediocrities. It’s time we got serious.

I don’t care where you live. I don’t care how deeply you’ve given up all hope for Washington, D.C. You’re going to want to help put David Segal in Congress, and you easily can. Just go here and give \$5 or \$50 or \$500: <http://votesegal.com>

Here’s audio of an interview I just did with David Segal: [mp3](#).

Here’s the transcript:

Swanson: This is David Swanson and I’m speaking with David Segal, candidate for Congress from Rhode Island, and someone I think that political progressives from around the country might want to be taking an interest in. David, thanks for speaking with me.

Segal: Thank you, and thank you for saying all those nice things.

Swanson: Well, I wonder if you could say from your own point of view what is your background that brings you to this and why you think people outside of Rhode Island might want to be paying a little attention.

Segal: I was a city councilman in Providence first elected as a Green in 2002 and then in the state legislature since 2006 as a Democrat. And if you want to talk about why I decided to make that transition from one party to another I'm happy to in more detail. But my work throughout those eight years has entailed pushing back against powerful, typically wealthy corporatist interests, against leadership within my own party when I was a Democrat, against the powers that be in Providence to try to do right by working families in Providence and Rhode Island, to try to push back against the standard fare corporatist interests that run the country and also run the state and also run the city. And work's happened on basically every issue front that a progressive might care about.

Swanson: I know a couple of areas that you've been involved with. One is proposing to cease funding out wars overseas should you be elected to Congress. I set up a list called A Coalition Against War Spending (<http://www.caws.us>), and you or your campaign immediately signed you on there with many other candidates. But many of them are Greens, many of them are Libertarians, and many are Democrats. What is your thinking in being willing to say you'll stop voting to fund the wars, because as you know, a great many members of Congress are willing to say they oppose the wars and they are critics of the wars but will not come within many miles of saying, "I won't fund the wars."

Segal: Right. Well, I'll start by saying I'm a vegetarian and wouldn't hurt a fly. I've been against the wars since before they began. I was, my first act on City Council in Providence was to sponsor an antiwar resolution in 2003 through the Cities for Peace program, which was obviously not a, it was going to end the war or prevent the war in its own right, but it was a necessary step between here and there. It had cities assert that the war was clearly going to have negative impacts on cities and their ability to function, fund municipal services and education, and so on. And it has, of course, had all of those effects. So my first act as a councilmember was to oppose the war in Iraq. And I represent the area around Brown and RISD and helped restart antiwar mobilization on campus which was waning during the sort of 2004, 2003-2004 era where there was this full Washington consensus that the war was OK and the war was going kind of well, even. And left activists were demoralized. We restarted a chapter here and I've helped organize and spoken at countless rallies about the war.

At the state level I've been a sponsor of the Bring the Guard Home legislation that has been pushed by Ben Manski and Liberty Tree which asserts essentially that the mandate under which the guard was federalized has expired. The Guard was federalized in order to neutralize the threat that Saddam Hussein posed and to enforce the existent UN resolution at the time of 2003 and that all of that has been accomplished, or at least is no longer on the table, and that therefore the Guard is improperly federalized and should be brought home. And if the legislation passes it compels the Attorney General of a given state to sue the federal government on those grounds. No such bill has passed yet, but what we're trying, and I have been, as anyone in Rhode Island would know, we have a very right-wing governor, so we're not going to withstand his veto here. And I think that, you know, war is a horror for a thousand different reasons that your listeners and your readers understand

through and through.

And the thing that, well the thing that is most striking to me, this is, back in 2003 when we were doing opportunity cost calculations about what it would cost to spend, when we thought it was only going to be \$100M, sorry \$100B to fund the war in Iraq, what does that mean, what is that worth to the world? The most striking stat that I remember from back then was it would provide enough funds to pay for vaccinations relative to every disease for which humanity has developed a vaccination for every child born for the next 75 years. And instead of doing that, and it's a little bit of a false choice since it is not something our government was going to do but I think it's always imperative to talk about the opportunity costs of war, and there are opportunity costs that might more readily have been met, you know, education funding domestically, public infrastructure funding domestically, and so on. But that contrast was just so stark to me — 75 years worth of children vaccinated relative to every disease for which humans have developed vaccinations versus going into a purposeless war in Iraq in which hundreds of thousands of people or millions of people would be killed.

Swanson: It's a stunning comparison. I want to ask you about some other topics if you have time, but I want to ask one quick follow-up on this one which is, you know, a lot of people run for Congress as opponents of war and then they get in there and the leader of their party tells them, you know, we'll give you a million dollars for television ads in your re-election campaign in two years if you do whatever we tell you, and so then what they tell the public is, "Well, I want to vote NO on this war money, but I need to wait and see what good things are packaged in there with it." And then, of course, the leadership packages lots of good things – jobs and schools and civil rights in with the war money. And then the voting goes down based on permission from the leadership to, you know, "You can vote against the war as long as we're sure the war is going to pass." It's not, you know, it sounds to me like you're making a more solid commitment than that.

Segal: Yes, I am. And in Rhode Island I've tried to develop alternative structures for legislators to lean on when the leadership makes such threats. I am the lead organizer for our progressive caucus. I founded a political action committee to support members of our progressive caucus so that if funding from sources dries up at leadership's request because something was done to offend them, that we would have at least some, some degree of money to fall back on to help fund our campaigns nonetheless. We've run ten, twelve races relatively modestly in the last cycle and hopefully we'll be able to do something in the forthcoming cycle.

And I've also helped organize my colleagues to stand up to leadership relative to budgetary issues in particular, and we've stood as a bloc to prevent the de-funding of municipal services during supplemental budget a year ago. It was the progressives negotiating hard with the leadership while the bell calling us into session to come in and take the vote was ringing for two hours and compelled them to restore tens of millions of dollars, well, \$25M which in Rhode Island is a big amount of money to municipal services and education funding that if not restored would have compelled progressive property tax increases and cut critical services for our constituents.

So, I'm an organizer at heart and I don't go into this naively and think that as a freshman legislator at the federal level you can just go around and wrangle all of your longer-standing colleagues and get them to do something different than they have done before. But my goal, if I get elected, is to be an organizer to help build solidarities among members and

help strengthen the Progressive Caucus so that it can stand stronger up against leadership when it comes to war funding, when it comes to health care, and so on.

Swanson: Well, as you're no doubt painfully aware, it never stands at all, so that would be wonderful and, I agree, you would have a fight as a freshman, but to be there trying to organize the Progressive Caucus to take stands would be phenomenal. The other topic I definitely wanted to ask you about was something else that you've done at the state level that relates to the national and that is, in my understanding you're the only state legislator in any state who has gone in in response to this Citizen's United ruling by the US Supreme Court allowing unlimited corporate money in elections and said not just that our state should formally urge Congress to amend the Constitution, but that the State of Rhode Island should call for a Constitutional convention. And when we get to two-thirds of the states, I believe it is, calling for such a convention, then we'll hold a convention, whether Congress likes it or not. Can you tell me why you took that approach?

Segal: Sure. I've been working closely with Change Congress and Larry Lessig and other reformers on that measure. I think again that your listeners and your readers need no explanation of why it's a travesty now that corporations can expend as much as they care to to affect our elections and their outcomes, and Congress is loathe to act to change this for a variety of reasons that are probably pretty obvious and need not be spelled out. When you're dealing with a structure that is itself, whose own perpetuation is contingent upon particular structures . . . sorry, when you're dealing with an entity like Congress whose voting perpetuates itself is contingent upon these financing structures it necessarily requires an outside force to come in and say, "No. We need to change these structures, " because any organization is going to do what it can to perpetuate its own well-being and the Constitution allows for two-thirds of the states to call for a federal constitutional convention. No such convention has ever actually happened, but just the act of organizing towards one can compel Congress to do the right thing, particularly relative to the seventeenth amendment, the amendment which says that senators must be elected by the people as opposed to state legislatures was only put forth by Congress when two-thirds of the states minus one had called for a constitutional convention to address precisely that issue.

So, even if we don't get to the convention proper, the act of agitating for it is something that can compel Congress to do the right thing. And it's become evident over the course of (unintelligible) that Congress is not going to act on its own in a meaningful way to address the Citizens' United decision. I mean, they are pushing the Disclose Act right now which is, you know, somewhere between here and there, but nobody has got a sense that Congress is actually going to put forth an amendment to the several states for ratification that would fundamentally assert that in fact the First Amendment does not allow for corporations to spend as they care to in our elections. And so a constitutional convention and outside intervention is necessary.

Swanson: That being said, and I enthusiastically agree with all of it, would you be inclined to sign on to Congresswoman Donna Edwards's amendment in Congress?

Segal: Oh yes, of course.

Swanson: Because there are a handful of Congress members trying against all odds.

Segal: Sure. There are some that deserve credit for it, but it's just clear that leadership is not going to let it happen, and, we can help them in their efforts by agitating as such from

the outside and all those reasonable Washington consensus types will swoop in if we get to the point where enough states are supporting a Con Con and say, "OK, don't worry, guys. Actually we'll do this on our own," and do right by us out of fear that if they do not a constitutional convention will actually happen.

Swanson: You know, I not only want better people, candidates like yourself in Congress, but I want Congress to have more power because just about all power has moved to the White House as well as to the two parties. And if I could ask you about one other area if you have time, a lot of us worked very hard to try to impeach Bush and Cheney and said, "If we don't, then the presidents are going to have even more powers." And of course, the president does now have even more powers, but he's a president from the other party, and so just as the Republicans never engaged in any oversight with Bush and the Democrats very little themselves, now the Democrats are not engaging in any oversight with Obama and no, aside from Joe Lieberman, nobody has subpoenaed anybody for a year-and-a-half, nobody has proposed to impeach anybody for a year-and-a-half, and you have committee hearings on lawyers who've put forth memos on who you can torture and how, people like John Yoo and Jay Bybee, without John Yoo or Jay Bybee there because you can no longer ask anyone to show up for a hearing. I'm wondering what your position is on the powers of Congress and Congress' long-forgotten powers to use its own police force to compel people to attend, to hold people in contempt itself and fine them as they refuse to testify, and otherwise assert its presence in Washington as the first branch in our Constitution.

Segal: And as the most democratic branch.

Swanson: Would you, if you saw someone like Jay Bybee who authored memos authorizing not just torture but aggressive war at presidents' whims sitting there as a lifetime judge, would you consider the possibility of submitting Articles of Impeachment for someone like that?

Segal: Yes, of course. I don't think it needs to be said, but yes, of course, I think that Congress should make broader use of its oversight power, something I wish had happened here around the state of Rhode Island more readily. But I, yes, I, we, there's no reason to tolerate the abuses of power that defined the Bush administration. And I would have signed on to efforts by Dennis and by others, by you and your organization, to try to compel testimony under oath and to compel impeachment where proper.

Swanson: So what can people do to help you? When is your primary? What are you up against? And how can people help?

Segal: It's a September 14 primary, four-way race, clearly winnable. We have a really robust field after we had our first daylight canvass on Saturday and had more than 50 volunteers out. Sorry, first district-wide canvass, I should have said, had more than 50 volunteers out throughout the district. And we'll be doing a regular rhythm of such canvasses throughout the campaign. And the field is really going to be the lifeblood of this effort as it's been for my elections to the statehouse and to the city council. But we still need money to help fuel those efforts. We need to pay for literature, we need to pay for food and water for our volunteers, we need to, ideally, accrue enough funding to go up on TV and compete in that venue as well. So people can donate at segalforcongress.com. We've raised a hundred some thousand dollars in the first few weeks of my campaign in small increments and want to raise money in a democratic way and want to win this election in a democratic way through a genuinely grassroots effort. So even a modest donation of \$5, \$10 would be incredibly

helpful.

Swanson: Terrific. I will let everyone know that I can. I think the House of Representatives is where we're going to get any control, if we are, in Washington. And having people there willing to take a stand even if they're not from our own district is what's going to make a difference. Anything else we should know?

Segal: No. I would, thanks so much for speaking with me. And I'm, there's contact info up on the web site of anybody has a more detailed question. I've written about a thousand articles over the years for Huffingtonpost and for more mainstream papers, for CommonDreams and Truthout, and so on, and there's a lot of info out there. But if people have questions they should feel free to get in touch with the campaign directly.

Swanson: Wonderful. David Segal, S-E-G-A-L, Segal. SegalforCongress.Com or VoteSegal.com. Thanks for speaking with me.

Segal: Thanks so much, David.

Transcribed by Linda Swanson.

David Segal's website: <http://votesegal.com>

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