

Petri says recent Dem wins show need to work across party lines

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A retired Republican congressman is calling Democrat Conor Lamb's victory in Pennsylvania an example of why incumbents should be stressing their bipartisanship this election year.

Former U.S. Rep Tom Petri of Wisconsin's 6th CD figures the special election results in Pennsylvania, plus the election in December of Democrat Doug Jones in Alabama, is a wake-up call for incumbents across the nation.

"And what does the wake-up call tell you? It tells you that if you want to get re-elected, you better start working across political lines and looking for solutions rather than just throwing mud at the other side," Petri told WisPolitics.com.

Channeling that sentiment, Petri is joining hundreds of other former politicians to rally behind "Fix Politics Now," a campaign by Issue One, a bipartisan political reform organization. Petri represented Wisconsin for 35 years from 1979 to 2015.

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While Petri won't be actively campaigning for any candidates, he's getting behind the effort to change the American political system by limiting the role of money in politics and calling for increased bipartisanship.

While Petri acknowledged partisanship has its place in the political system, he's increasingly seen public outrage at politicians' inability to budget and manage affairs. Petri didn't offer a straightforward explanation as to why partisanship has heightened in past years, but supposed the internet and a lack of an overriding issue or external threat to the nation has something to do with it.

“When we don’t have that, people tend to fragment. And that’s what we’ve been seeing a lot of. That’s exploited by different groups that have their own agendas,” he said.

Partisanship has gotten so severe, he argues, that it has begun to erode traditionally bipartisan institutions like the House Intelligence Committee, which this week completed an investigation into Russian election meddling.

It confirmed interference but claims the interference did not favor either 2016 presidential candidate. House Democrats objected to the conclusion, and have floated several allegations of potential involvement between associates of President Donald Trump and Russia.

The Senate intelligence committee is still investigating.

“There’s been a pretty radical breakdown of the traditional order, and people in both parties who served on that [House] committee in the past have been deploring that breakdown, and I think it’s fair to criticize the chairman of the committee and some of the others on it for allowing that to happen,” Petri said.

One of the major tenets of the “Fix it” campaign is to urge candidates to join the Congressional Reformers Caucus, a bipartisan group of several House members — including U.S. Reps. Mike Gallagher, R-Green Bay, and Ron Kind, D-La Crosse — that works together for “common-sense reforms to the legislative process.”

Changes that Petri and the “Fix Politics Now” campaign are calling for include increasing the role of small campaign contributions from individuals, as well as addressing online disinformation campaigns from foreign governments, notably Russia.

Championing small individual campaign contributions, Petri argues, would likely increase public interest in the political process and lessen the influence of large contributions.

“If you make a contribution to a candidate once ... it’s like putting money down in the lottery,” he said. “You’re very likely to follow that process and become more interested.”

Petri says tax deductions or credits could be re-introduced, making contributions essentially free for voters. And with the ease of contributing online, he figures large

donations would play a less significant role, meaning politicians would spend less time chasing checks and more time legislating for their constituents.

Such a move, he said, would level the playing field for non-incumbents who don't have connections to businesses and associations related to their committee assignments.

Another significant reform Petri champions is strengthening the enforcement powers of the Federal Election Commission, which he reasons has stalemated and is unable to appropriately enforce campaign finance laws already on the books.

Petri and the Issue One organization are also throwing their support behind the Honest Ads Act to combat foreign influence in elections. The legislation would require online ads to be regulated the same way that TV, radio and print ads are.