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Newt Gingrich is no outsider

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PRINCETON, New Jersey (CNN) -- Newt Gingrich likes to fancy himself a counterestablishment rebel. He has attempted to tap into the anger of tea party Republicans by reminding voters about his glory days as a maverick conservative in the House of Representatives, which culminated in the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994.

On NBC's "Meet the Press," he said, "In Florida, my case is going to be very simple. You have a clear establishment candidate in Mitt Romney. ... And you have somebody whose entire career has been a Reagan populist conservative."

The trouble is that Newt Gingrich is about as establishment as one can get. The thinness of his claim to be some kind of populist outsider exposes the myth that many conservative Republicans promote when they distance themselves from the power they actually wield and claim that they are still outside the political system.

Gingrich's personal history shows how conservatives successfully entrenched themselves in Washington and learned to love the trappings of power, as well as the electoral benefits of government. Throughout his time in Congress, Gingrich played a key role in moving conservatives from being outsiders to insiders over the course of the 1980s and 1990s.

When Gingrich was elected to the House in 1978, he was a true rebel. Gingrich and other conservative Republicans fought against senior Republican leaders such as Robert Michel of Illinois. They argued that those Republicans were too often willing to compromise with the Democratic leadership in Congress and had moved too far to the center.

Gingrich, who helped form the Conservative Opportunity Society to serve as an informal caucus for these younger Republicans, launched a series of attacks on various Democratic speakers, culminating with the resignation of Speaker Jim Wright in 1989. Each time, Gingrich claimed the Democrats had grown fat with power, that they had become corrupt and incompetent and needed to be removed.

Even as Gingrich was making those arguments, the tensions between rhetoric and reality intensified. Republicans were already becoming used to power through their control of the executive branch, first with Ronald Reagan and then with George H.W. Bush. Republicans such as Gingrich kept their outsider mentality by claiming that the presidents were too willing to abandon the right and that, in different ways, they sold their movement out. Gingrich and others even criticized Reagan on these grounds. Furious about Reagan's decision to increase taxes in 1982, Gingrich accused the president of having tried to "score a touchdown for liberalism ..."

Once Republicans took over Capitol Hill in 1994, their entrenchment in Washington only deepened. Between 1994 and 2006, Republicans ruled Washington with an iron hand, remaining in control even after Gingrich resigned in 1999.

Congressional Republicans developed close ties to the lobbying community through the "K Street Project," in which legislators and lobbyists coordinated hiring decisions for positions in the major lobbying firms that went to former congressional staffers. After his own ouster, Gingrich dove into the murky world of ex-politicians who offer their access and reputation to organizations such as Freddie Mac. Even when they are not officially lobbying, they act in ways that certainly fit that bill in the eyes of most Americans.

Despite all their talk about dismantling government, congressional Republicans in the late 1990s and early 2000s voted in favor of government spending in areas such as agricultural subsidies and defense, programs that earned them favor with key electoral constituencies.

Conservative Republicans enjoyed power in other parts of Washington as well. They established a strong presence in the media on outlets such as Fox News. After the 1960s, conservatives founded a huge number of think tanks and policy organizations such as the **CATO Institute** that brought together right-wing experts and produced slick policy analyses that helped shift the terms of debate in the capital.

In short, Gingrich was part of a generation of conservatives who became the political establishment.

The proximity of conservatives to power became a debilitating political issue in 2006 when a series of scandals revolving around the lobbyist Jack Abramoff helped to bring down the Republican majority. As the conservative columnist Rich Lowry wrote at the time, "The GOP members can make a case that the scandal reflects more the way Washington works than the unique perfidy of their party, but even this is self-defeating, since Republicans run Washington."

President George W. Bush also came under attack from right-wing activists given that his administration had embraced certain forms of big government, including the TARP program that provided a huge bailout to financial institutions following the crash in September 2008. Although Democrats gained control of the White House and retained control of the Senate after 2010, Republicans have certainly not been pushed into the backbenches.

Obama has struggled to pursue his agenda as he came to realize that the conservative infrastructure in Washington remains formidable and has given conservatives a lasting voice in national affairs. Even the tea party movement has benefited from insiders such as Dick Armey who brought financial and organizational clout to support this grassroots movement.

It is time for Republican politicians to drop the illusion that they are outsiders to Washington and to accept that they have enjoyed power for much of the period since the 1970s. This would offer voters a much more honest debate about what their choices really are.

Otherwise, candidates such as Gingrich will continue to fuel the cynicism of many voters who see politicians who rail against Washington until it is exposed that they are as comfortable making deals on Pennsylvania Avenue as anyone else.

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