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Long-running 'Ted and Don' show showing age with voters

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For decades, Alaskans have contentedly called Ted Stevens senator, and Don Young congressman, their Republicans in far-off Washington.

Now other, less flattering names are creeping into conversation. Crook, for example. Or jerk. Or old, washed up.

And because of it, Democrats sense opportunity even in the Last Frontier, a state that has dealt them mostly defeat for a generation.

"I've been voting for Ted and Don all my life," says Scott Frank, 45, a blue-collar Republican sipping coffee at the Butte Cafe, "but they've really screwed up."

Shoulder-to-shoulder around a slab-wood table, Frank and his pals form a cigarette-smoke circle of plaid shirts, faded jeans and baseball caps. These men and many of the folks they know build radar equipment. They eat fried foods. Hunt and fish. Drink beer. Vote Republican.

"Maybe not this time," says waitress Diana Gage as she scoots behind Scott and his brother Randy, two plates, heaped with beef, held high above her head. "Don and Ted have done good, but let's get some young blood in there and let them build up some of that seniority."

Stevens and Young have served a combined 74 years in Congress 39 for Stevens and 35 for Young and Alaskans consider that longevity a valuable commodity. It brings roads, bridges, jobs and other federal perks to this isolated state.

"But they can't live forever," says Landon Wells, adjusting his American flag cap. "Eventually, either God or us voters are going to end their seniority."

The Justice Department may have a say, too.

The FBI is looking into whether the 84-year-old Stevens, whose name graces the state's largest airport, received illegal gifts from VECO Corp., a once powerful oil services firm. Bill Allen, the former VECO chief who has pleaded guilty to bribing Alaska state legislators, testified in trials that he oversaw extensive renovations at Stevens' home and sent VECO employees to work on it.

FBI and IRS agents last summer raided the four-bedroom house in Girdwood, a resort town about 40 miles south of Anchorage, and two sources told The Associated Press that the FBI was working with Allen when it secretly taped phone calls between Stevens and the disgraced businessman.

Young, 74, is tied to the VECO inquiry but his problems run deeper. The FBI is investigating his ties to a Florida developer who held a fundraiser for Young in 2005 and then benefited from a change the congressman made to a federal highway bill as chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

A \$10 million grant for widening Interstate 75 in Florida's Collier and Lee counties was redirected to the Coconut Road Interchange in Lee County, a project that would allow the development of land owned by Young fundraiser Daniel Aronoff.

Even in Congress, with its high threshold for shame, Young has become a pariah. The House voted 358-51 last month to send a highway bill to President Bush with a request to the Justice Department that it investigate the Florida project.

Both Young and Stevens deny wrongdoing. Young's seat is considered more vulnerable, but both face strong Democratic rivals. Young may not survive the GOP primary.

In a speech on the House floor, Young defended the Coconut Road project, saying he listened to Florida residents who supported the widening of the ramp at Coconut Road to provide better access to shelter during hurricanes. He said the Senate, which initially called for the investigation, was meddling in House affairs.

"That," Young said, "is a slippery, slippery road."

So is representing the people of Florida when you're elected by Alaskans. Young has been rebuked by widely popular Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, a fellow Republican whose rout of then-Gov. Frank Murkowski in the 2006 primary signaled the public's desire for political reform.

Palin's lieutenant governor, Sean Parnell, is opposing Young in the Republican primary on a promise to restore integrity to the state's sole seat in the U.S. House. "We've become a picture of greed and excess to the nation," Parnell said.

Confronting head-on the issue of seniority and its power to deliver jobs and federal dollars to the state, Parnell said he will appeal to Alaskans' independent nature and urge them to not be afraid of change. "I'm just asking Alaskans to be courageous," he said, "and take charge of their future.

While Stevens is still described as a statesman and even godfather of the state, Young's ill manners and perceived arrogance have cost him support. In Alaska, population 670,000, politics are personal and followed like a sport. Ted, Don and Sarah (voters refer to them by first name) are expected to behave.

Young does not.

"Congratulations," the congressman sneered to Parnell upon news of the primary challenge, "I beat your dad and I'm going to beat you." Young soundly defeated Parnell's father, Pat Parnell, who ran as a Democrat in 1980.

Later, he profanely confronted Parnell's wife, Sandy. "I'm going to enjoying kicking his" butt, Young said.

To supporters who might wonder why he's spending more than \$1 million of their campaign donations on legal bills, Young said, "I have a right to spend my money as I think I should spend it."

His money. It's comments like those that make supporters wonder whether it's time for Young and perhaps even Stevens to go.

"We're the kind of state that needs the bacon that Ted and Don bring home," said David Prah, 63, a Republican working at a gun shop in Palin's hometown of Wasilla. "But we don't need all this negative attention."

And so go the sentiments of voter after voter, many of whom cite Barack Obama's presidential campaign as emblematic of the desire for change in general. And the investigations as their motivation to consider change, specifically, in Congress.

With hope in this GOP outpost, Democrats seek to expand their majorities in the House and Senate.

"Everybody wants change," a dismissive Young told reporters in February, "what is change?"

He and Stevens may be about to find out.

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