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Democrats' Takeover in House Transforms Washington Overnight

By Jonathan Allen, CQ Staff

Voters across the country dispatched Republican lawmakers Tuesday in favor of Democrats, ending four years of total GOP control in Congress and giving voice to a party that has challenged President Bush's leadership of the war in Iraq.

California Rep. Nancy Pelosi will become the highest-ranking woman ever in American government if, as expected, she is elected Speaker of the House in January. She is poised to lead Democrats as they move to check Bush's authority and convince voters that they deserve to keep control of the chamber — and take back the Oval Office — in 2008.

As Democrats prepare to take control of the House for the first time in 12 years, their immediate agenda includes increasing the minimum wage, allowing the government to negotiate for lower prices under the 2003 Medicare drug law ([PL 108-173](#)), lowering college tuition costs, expanding embryonic stem cell research and implementing the remaining recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission.

The Democrats also plan to pass an overhaul of ethics guidelines and implement pay-as-you-go budgeting through changes to House rules.

“Democrats promise to work together in a bipartisan way for all Americans,” Pelosi told a cheering crowd in Washington early Wednesday. “Democrats intend to lead the most open, the most honest and the most ethical Congress in history.”

But their electoral success Tuesday may be viewed by some as less of an endorsement of their domestic agenda than as a rebuke of the president, who has lost public confidence because of the war, the government's response to Hurricane Katrina, and his botched efforts to overhaul the nation's Social Security and immigration laws.

In taking over committee chairmanships, Democrats will have the power to subpoena White House officials and documents and generally oversee the functioning of the executive branch.

Democrats also moved closer to parity in the Senate, but it was unclear early Wednesday which party would end up in the majority. And a 50-50 split in Senate seats, with Vice President Dick Cheney providing a tie-breaking vote as he did in the first half of 2001, was possible.

The last time Democrats held either chamber was in the 107th Congress, when independent Vermont Sen. James M. Jeffords left the Republican Party, giving Democrats a one-vote Senate majority that ended with the 2002 election.

Even if Democrats do not take control in the Senate, their increased numbers in that chamber and their partnership with the new House majority will enhance their role in lawmaking, particularly in conference negotiations, where Republicans can no longer unilaterally lock them out of closed-door discussions.

Glasnost or Partisanship?

Pelosi has pledged to operate a more open House that includes the minority in the legislative process to a far greater degree than Illinois Republican J. Dennis Hastert has during his eight years as Speaker — the longest run for a GOP Speaker in history.

Close allies say Pelosi is determined to bring a new air of bipartisanship to the House and to build a centrist legislative coalition.

“She’ll be the Speaker of the House of Representatives, not the Speaker of the Democratic Party,” said **Martin A. Russo, a lobbyist and former Democratic congressman from Illinois (1975-93)** who is a member of Pelosi’s inner circle.

But Pelosi’s desire for a more bipartisan House may not play well with the new GOP minority, which is expected to carry a more conservative flavor after the loss Tuesday night of moderate senior Republicans such as Nancy L. Johnson of Connecticut, Charles Bass of New Hampshire, and E. Clay Shaw Jr. of Florida.

“This is bomb-throwing time. Don’t expect to see a whole lot of bipartisanship in the House,” said John J. Pitney, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif.

Pitney said Pelosi may quickly discover that controlling the House could require implementing tougher restrictions on the Republican minority.

“It’s not because of bad faith on her part or that she has bad intentions, it’s just the reality of leading a narrow House majority at a time of partisan polarization,” he said. “She’s going to have to be very tough.”

A conservative GOP aide underscored Pitney’s point, noting, “There’s a lot of mischievous amendments we could come up with if they let amendments be made in order.”

But Thomas Mann, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, said Pelosi has little incentive to jam partisan bills through the House without help from a Republican Senate and Bush.

“If she goes back on those promises, she’ll take a severe beating — and for nothing,” Mann said.

The Lame-Duck Years

Many political experts also say major policy breakthroughs could be hard to come by over the next two years, regardless of what the new House leadership does.

“In divided party control, with an administration that has been a fairly polarizing administration, I don’t think you should expect major legislative outcomes,” said Bruce I. Oppenheimer, a professor of political science at Vanderbilt University. “What I expect is that the Democrats are going to try to use the House to sort of push the agenda.”

With the outlook bleak for major legislative breakthroughs, the Iraq war could dominate debate in the 110th Congress.

The president is expected to send a \$130 billion to \$160 billion “emergency” spending request for Iraq to Congress early next year, setting up the first of what’s expected to be a series of contentious debates about the shape and length of U.S. involvement in Iraq and the effects of the war on the nation’s fiscal health.

White House officials have said the president’s Iraq policy will not be affected by the midterm election, but under the Constitution, spending bills must originate in the House. That House will now be controlled by Democrats, and there are some Republican members as well who have grown increasingly concerned about the administration’s war policy.

“There are some things that we can get done, but in general what we’ve got here is the opening of the curtain on 2008,” said G. William Hoagland, the top budget aide to outgoing Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn. “And the next two years, and next year in particular, will be focused on foreign policy and not much will get done beyond that.”

Hoagland and others named the minimum-wage increase — particularly if tied to small-business tax breaks — as a legislative agenda item that is likely to become law. A stalled immigration bill ([S 2611](#)) passed by the Senate and backed by the president would also likely have better prospects with a Democratic-led House.

“The president will have to be real crafty in picking what’s doable,” said Rep. Zach Wamp, R-Tenn. “I’m concerned that there’s not a long honeymoon of coalition because the 2008 presidential is looming.”

Some in the Republican Party say Bush would do well to seek out common ground with the Democratic House.

“When we worked with the Democrats, everybody’s numbers went up,” said Michael Deaver, who served as President Ronald Reagan’s deputy chief of staff. “I really do think that the party, the president and country win when we take a bipartisan approach.”

A Closely Divided Senate

On the Senate side, Democrats can expect to be more influential in the 110th Congress because of the narrowed gap with their Republican counterparts and because their party colleagues now control the House. But with Democrats in control of the House, the Senate also will become an increasingly important battleground for Republicans as the two parties prepare for the 2008 presidential contest.

Many observers, however, actually expect the Senate to run more smoothly if, as expected, Majority Whip Mitch McConnell of Kentucky replaces the retiring Frist, who critics say had one eye on the presidency during his tenure as majority leader.

McConnell will be pitted against Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada, with whom he has long worked on the Appropriations Committee. The two senior lawmakers, who share a penchant for the seemingly contradictory arts of backroom deal-making and partisan gunslinging, are widely expected to run the Senate in a more predictable fashion.

Sen. Rick Santorum's defeat at the hands of Democrat Bob Casey Jr. in Pennsylvania leaves Republicans without an obvious heir to the whip job McConnell will be giving up.

In addition to Santorum, Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee had been campaigning for the job, but he could face opposition from former Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, who was easily re-elected Tuesday.

The Emerging Republican Minority

House Republicans also must decide in the coming days who will lead them as a minority party.

Hastert is not expected to be a candidate for any minority leadership position.

Of the top three current GOP leaders, Majority Leader John A. Boehner of Ohio — elected to his post in February — is likely to survive what could turn into a post-election purge among Republicans.

He is expected to run for minority leader. But Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana, the head of the conservative Republican Study Committee, could challenge him for the job. Pence has cultivated a national conservative following with his opposition to federal spending and leadership of a band of Republicans who defied top House Republicans in voting against the 2003 Medicare drug law.

Current Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Joe L. Barton, R-Texas, also has indicated he might make a run for minority leader as well.

Republican Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri could face a challenge from any of several junior lawmakers. But his stiffest competition, Chief Deputy Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia, would be hard-pressed to run against Blunt, who tapped him for a leadership role at the start of the 108th Congress.

Whoever ends up leading the GOP minority will have to get Republicans moving in the same direction quickly, according to a GOP lobbyist.

“They really need to be smart about setting up contrasts and engineering votes that make it clear what the differences between the parties are, and make sure that people turn out and give the presidential candidate something to run against,” the lobbyist said.

Early Trouble for Democrats?

While Pelosi's place in the Speaker's office appears secure, Democrats will still have to choose the rest of their leadership slate in elections scheduled for next week.

Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland and Rep. John P. Murtha of Pennsylvania are squaring off for the post of majority leader.

Rep. Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, who led the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, is expected to decide this week whether he will make a run for a leadership position, according to one Democratic aide.

Democratic Caucus Chairman James E. Clyburn Jr. of South Carolina is planning to run for majority whip. But he could get competition from either Emanuel or Rep. Diana DeGette of Colorado.

Meanwhile, Rep. John B. Larson of Connecticut, a close Pelosi ally, is looking to move up from vice chairman to chairman of the caucus.

Several potential candidates have emerged for the post of vice chairman as well, including Mike Ross of Arkansas, and Xavier Becerra and Hilda L. Solis, both of California.

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