



110TH CONGRESS CONVENES UNDER DEMOCRATIC MANAGEMENT

January 8, 2007

For the first time in a dozen years, both the Senate and the House of Representatives are under the control of the Democratic Party.

Democrats, who took back control of both houses of Congress in November's elections, have pledged to increase the minimum wage, cut student loan interest rates, fund stem cell research, end subsidies to energy companies and increase scrutiny of the Iraq war budget.

Many of the measures are expected to pass easily in the House, which Democrats control by a comfortable 233-202 margin.

But with a thin 51-49 lead in the Senate, Democrats will require additional support from Republicans -- a Senate rule requires 60 votes to overcome filibusters, long speeches that can kill legislation.

New Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said Democrats would work "in a bipartisan basis in an open fashion to solve the problems of the American people."

But, with Democrats running all of the committees that shape legislation after years of being shut out of decision-making, it is not clear the new Congress will act cooperatively.

The new face of Congress

Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California is the new speaker of the House of Representative and has vast influence over what gets done over the term.

She is also now second in the line of presidential succession -- behind the vice president -- making her the most powerful woman in U.S. political history.

"Becoming the first woman speaker will send a message to young girls and women across the country that anything is possible for them," Pelosi said at the opening of the new session.

The new Congress is also notable for its religious diversity. Of Congress's 63 freshmen, Democrat Keith Ellison of Minnesota is the first Muslim, and Hank Johnson of Georgia and Mazie Hirono of Hawaii are the first two Buddhists.

Ellison sparked controversy for taking the oath of office with his hand on the Quran, instead of the Bible. During last week's ceremony, he used a copy of the Muslim holy text found in President Thomas Jefferson's library.

100-hour agenda

On Tuesday, the clock starts ticking on Speaker Pelosi's ambitious "100-hour agenda," a list of measures Democrats have vowed to pass in the House's first 100 legislative hours (its first two weeks).

Scheduled votes involve increasing the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour, cutting interest rates on college loans, lowering drug costs, ending subsidies for oil companies and expanding stem cell research.

If the bills reach the president's desk, President Bush may find new use for the veto pen he's used only once in his first six years in the White House -- to prevent new stem cell funding.

First bills from the new House

By the end of its second day, the new House had passed ethics and finance legislation -- with mixed response from Republicans.

Republicans applauded changes that would ban lawmakers from accepting gifts from lobbyists and that would ask members of Congress to disclose "earmarks," the name given to unidentified pet projects.

Republicans had proposed the legislation in the previous Congress after some members were found guilty of accepting bribes from lobbyists and corporations in return for earmarked projects.

The financial measure had less support from House Republicans. The "pay-as-you-go," or "pay-go," rule would require more detailed accounting from lawmakers: Any tax cut would have to have corresponding cuts in government spending or a tax increase elsewhere.

But with Democrats proposing tax cuts for middle-income families, Senate Republicans said "pay-go" would allow Democrats to justify tax increases, which Republicans generally oppose.

"The last thing we need to do is to be raising taxes in this country, and 'pay-go' is the first step toward raising taxes," said new Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Associated Press reported.

Challenging the Iraq war

Another issue for the two parties is the war in Iraq. Pelosi and new Senate leader Reid sent President Bush a letter asking him not to send more troops.

Pelosi told CBS's "Face the Nation," "If the president wants to add to this mission, he is going to have to justify it, and this is new for him because up until now the Republican Congress has given him a blank check with no oversight, no standards, no conditions."

The Democratic leaders requested that U.S. troops begin withdrawing from Iraq within six months.

Democratic opposition to the war is not new, but the letter underscores the challenges President Bush will face from Congress in his final two years in office.

-- *Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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