



NEW CONGRESS IS CHALLENGE FOR PRESIDENT BUSH

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With Tuesday's elections, Democrats have taken control of the House and made substantial gains in the Senate. But what this means for Washington and President Bush for the next two years is still up in the air.

With their victory on election night, Democrats now control the House of Representatives for the first time in twelve years and may even control the Senate as well. Undoubtedly, the next two years in Congress will be very different.

Already, the election has had consequences. On Wednesday, President Bush announced the resignation of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who had been the target of much criticism from Democrats, along with some Republicans, for the situation in Iraq.

The new Democratic leadership will try to satisfy the expectations of the diverse group of voters that elected them. However, they will still have a Republican president to reckon with.

The House

At this time it is unclear exactly how large the Democratic majority will be as there are several House races in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Georgia and elsewhere that are still too close to call.

However, it is certain that when the new Congress convenes in January, Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California will be the Speaker of the House, the first woman to ever hold that position.

The Speaker of the House is one of the most powerful positions in Washington because it has the authority to almost single-handedly set the agenda for the House. She also becomes the third person in line to become president should something happen to the president and vice-president.

Many Republicans believe that Pelosi is an extreme liberal who will raise taxes and prematurely pull the troops out of Iraq.

On her Web site, www.housedemocrats.gov, she tries to counter this claim by establishing six areas – including making higher education affordable and decreasing U.S. dependence on foreign oil – that the Democrats will try to work on.

Pelosi has been critical of the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq War, calling it a "bad idea" that has been "badly executed," but it is unclear whether she will be able to rally her fellow Democrats to end the war. After all, many new Democrats were elected from traditionally conservative areas like Indiana, where the Democrats picked up three seats.

The Senate

As of Wednesday, control of the Senate was still up in the air.

Democrats have 48 seats plus two independents who are likely to vote with them and the Republicans have 49 seats.

The Democrats won the crucial 48th seat in the Montana Senate race, which was so close a winner was not declared until late Wednesday morning.

The Virginia seat is still far too close to call and there are reports that there may be a recount and legal challenges to that decision. Democrats must win the Virginia seat to be able to claim majority status in the Senate because, in the case of a 50-50 tie, Vice President Dick Cheney would cast the tiebreaking vote for the Republicans.

Either way, there will be a new Majority Leader in the Senate because Bill Frist of Tennessee, the current Majority Leader, is retiring.

If the Republicans retain the majority, their leader will most likely be Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. However, if the Democrats win the seats in both Montana and Virginia, their leader will almost definitely be Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada.

Unlike the more partisan Frist, who may be readying a run for president in 2008, both McConnell and Reid have reputations as dealmakers who try to reach compromises with their political opponents.

Charles Babington reported in the *Washington Post* that "[m]any senators say that either Reid or McConnell can lead the Senate with more skill than Frist, who struggled to build winning coalitions."

However, Rutgers University scholar Ross K. Baker observed in the *Post* that, after the bruising campaign "[a]ny weakness will be highlighted; any lapse will be emphasized."

Along with this, the fact that both McConnell and Reid come to the position distracted with their own financial scandals could mean that the Senate may take a backseat to the House in terms of leadership and productivity.

The next two years

After Tuesday night's momentous elections, Congress is now in uncharted territory. One can only speculate on the path that it will take now that Democrats have control of the House.

Will the Democrats be emboldened by their first real victory since 1994 and pursue a liberal agenda at the risk of alienating the newly elected conservative Democrats? Or will they try to forge a more centrist path at the risk of alienating their uncompromising liberal base?

And what of President Bush and his remaining 2 years in office?

It is highly unlikely that he will agree to any plan that would bring troops home from Iraq in the near future. However, it seems that he will have to make more compromises if he is to have any hope of realizing his agenda.

While the new direction of Congress remains unclear, one thing is certain: from a political standpoint, it's about to get interesting.

-- *Compiled by David Schultz for NewsHour Extra*

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