

### *Legislative Scoreboard*

## **Schakowsky Sees Discord in the Democratic Process**

By Marguerite Allen - Evanston Roundtable

12/01/2004

U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, who is also Chief Deputy House Whip, headed back early to Washington after the election to meet with House leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Cal.).

With the battle cry, "Don't mourn, mobilize," Rep. Schakowsky says Democrats are strategizing for upcoming fights against the Iraq war; against Supreme Court nominees with "right-wing, ideologically driven agendas"; and against the push to privatize social security. Looking to 2006, they say they will challenge those who voted for "moral values" to expand that definition to include healthcare, education, the environment, the economy, Medicare and prescription drugs.

In the meantime, Rep. Schakowsky has other serious concerns that she believes have failed to sufficiently engage the electorate. One is the media's responsibility to provide the public with accurate information. Another is the legislators' duty to conduct their affairs in the public view and permit open debate.

"The process," she says, "particularly in the House, has been one of systematically shutting out debate and democratic procedures"- and, by extension, shutting out the voices of millions of Americans.

One news story she believed was overlooked by mainstream media involved the vote on the Authorization for the Use of Force Against Iraq. House Democrats were debating the question: How strong was the Administration's case for going into Iraq? Rep. Pelosi's answer, based on her knowledge as a member of the House Intelligence Committee was that there was no intelligence to back the administration's request for military action.

With this information, Congresswoman Schakowsky, along with one or two other Democrats,

went door-to-door, assuring colleagues that if they voted no, they would not be alone. In the final vote, 60 percent of House Democrats voted against authorization.

Nevertheless, she points out, mainstream media chose to portray the vote as an overwhelming bipartisan victory for the Bush Administration. As the situation in Iraq worsens, Rep. Schakowsky says her vote looks better and better.

The history of the 2001 Patriot Act is similarly instructive. Not only the content, but the way the Patriot Act was written and passed, concern the Representative. The House Judiciary Committee approved a unanimous, bipartisan bill and sent it to the floor of the House. But the House never had a chance to consider it. Instead, "overnight a new bill was written" by the administration and John Ashcroft, she said.

Debate took place at night after all of the Members were told to go home, said Rep. Schakowsky, and amendments were not permitted. The House's 435 members had access to only two copies of the hefty Act before voting. Most legislators admitted they hadn't even read it before voting, she said. Rep. Schakowsky found it hard to vote against a bill given the name "USA Patriot Act" six weeks after 9/11. But she did, as did 65 others House members and one Senator. "I knew that my district would understand that vote and support it," she said.

The Medicare Bill is another case in point. The administration deliberately presented a lower projected cost than Medicare's own actuary gave them. As soon as the bill was passed, they adjusted the figure to match the actuary's. Many in the House said the bill would never have passed with the correct estimated cost.

Republican House members literally locked the door on all the Democrats assigned to the committee discussing that bill, Rep. Schakowsky said, locking out Representative John Dingell, one of the few who actually was in Congress when the original bill was passed in 1965. They also locked out Representative Charles Rangel, the only African American on the committee. In September, House Democrats introduced a resolution of inquiry to force the Administration to release Medicare drug-cost estimates. Ten months earlier, the head of Medicare had, says Rep. Schakowsky, "illegally prohibited the actuary from giving members of Congress information on the cost of the bill."

The Medicare bill, Representative Schakowsky said, was "really written by and for the pharmaceutical companies and the HMOs, with very little benefit to Medicare beneficiaries." She also said there is complete bipartisan support for the reimportation of drugs, although the Bush administration will not permit it.

A resolution of inquiry - a parliamentary procedure requiring a response - called for the names and affiliations of Vice President Cheney's private energy task force members. Debate on the matter was prohibited, and Rep. Dingel, the ranking Democrat, was barely allowed to give opening statements. Voting no, Rep. Schakowsky admonished Chairman Bill Barton (Republican, Texas), "Shame on you, Mr. Chairman."

Congresswoman Schakowsky told some of her constituents who recently visited her in

Washington, D.C., that she is "optimistic" about the mid-term elections. She added she hopes people will continue to protest the war in Iraq.