

IL Durbin Senate Whip; Durbin Elected to Second-Ranking

Democratic Post in Senate

By NICOLE ZIEGLER DIZON - Associated Press

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CHICAGO (AP) - Sen. Dick Durbin won his colleagues' approval Tuesday to become the Democratic Senate whip, a role he hopes will help raise Illinois' profile in negotiations on spending bills and other legislation.

Durbin, 59, was unopposed in his bid for the party's second-ranking position in the Senate. He will replace Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, who was elevated to Senate minority leader following Sen. Tom Daschle's loss in the November election.

"What I said to the Democratic senators today is that our first obligation is to try to find common ground with the president," Durbin said. "Where we can't find common ground, we have to stand our ground."

Standing that ground could include a continued role in blocking "extremist" nominees to the federal judiciary, Durbin said, while noting that more than 95 percent of the judges President Bush nominated had been approved.

As whip, Durbin will work to keep Democratic senators in line with party positions and help come up with strategies to pass or defeat legislation. He also will be responsible for getting

members to the floor for important votes.

Durbin said Senate Democrats have not yet made their list of priorities for the new term, but top issues will include protecting Social Security and Medicare and helping working families with proposals like increasing the minimum wage.

The Illinois senator said his first obligation remains to his constituents back home, and he said his leadership role should give the state more clout.

"I think it will help," Durbin said. "I'm going to be in leadership at a high level and involved in a lot of negotiations on important bills."

U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, an Evanston Democrat, called Durbin a "great leader and also the man next door."

"I think it's great that there will be more national attention focused on Dick Durbin," **Schakowsky** said. "I think he's been a little too well-kept secret power in the Democratic Party."

**Schakowsky** said Durbin is good at finding areas of compromise between Democrats and Republicans. But the fact that he's from Illinois -- which went strongly Democratic in this month's elections -- also gives him the freedom to fight for the party's positions, she said.

Durbin, who lives in Springfield, served 14 years in the U.S. House before winning his Senate seat in 1996. He was re-elected in 2002.

Also Tuesday, Republicans gave House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois his fourth term as their chamber's leader.

Hastert, 62, told fellow House Republicans that his agenda for the upcoming session includes Social Security, tax and legal reform and a continued focus on homeland security.

"What a great election!" he said. "What a great time to be a Republican in Washington, D.C.!"