

A House Less Divided

November 9th, 2002

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The National Journal

Ever since they won the House majority in 1994, House Republican leaders have emphasized that they rise-or-fall-as a team. That claim has sometimes been tested, particularly during the tenure of Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., who led his ranks on a roller-coaster ride of triumphant highs, occasional hairpin turns, and death-defying plummets into the political abyss. But now, House Republicans are gushing that their approach has paid off: They are largely attributing their historic electoral success on November 5 to the fact that they signed on two years ago as loyal members of Team Bush.

In interviews, House Republicans said that President Bush's high public-approval ratings, his chief initiatives of the war on terrorism and last year's tax cut, and his tireless campaigning for their party's candidates were decisive in the election. "If you ask me one significant factor, it's the president's popularity at this point, and his active engagement on his agenda," said Rep. Tom Davis of Virginia, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee. And Republican lawmakers say that Bush's willingness to extend himself on their behalf is certain to produce legislative dividends. "No Republican president in my lifetime ever has put all his chips on the table to help our team as [Bush] has," said Rep. John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, the chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee. "It will make a big difference in the eagerness of House and Senate Republicans to assist the president."

House Republicans maintain that, for all their loyalty, they won't necessarily rubber-stamp whatever Bush requests. Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., will continue to be "an honest broker" for GOP members in dealing with the administration, said a House Republican source. But top administration strategists are confident that, in return for Bush's extraordinary political cooperation, GOP legislators will pay considerable attention to the White House's concerns. Davis said that if Bush calls for Social Security reform, for example, "we will be happy to have

that discussion with him."

Before Election Day, House Republicans held 223 seats, or a six-seat majority. That gave small clusters of GOP members virtual veto power over the details of controversial presidential initiatives. With their election gain, however, Republican leaders have a bit more breathing room and leverage in dealing with competing factions. At press time, it appeared that the House in the 108th Congress would have 228 Republicans, 204 Democrats, and one independent who usually votes with the Democrats. Depending on the outcome of a contest in Colorado that was too close to call, and another in Louisiana that will require a runoff, House Republican seats could grow to 230, which was precisely their high-water mark following the pivotal 1994 election.

House Democrats, by contrast, emerged from the election as anything but a team. Reeling from the latest blow at the ballot box and searching for answers, they now face the need to replace their party leader, Rep. Richard A. Gephardt, D-Mo., who had exercised strong command during their eight years in legislative exile. Gephardt's plan to relinquish his post as minority leader was hardly unexpected by House insiders. But his departure was marked by unusual public criticism of his actions by some party members. And other senior Democrats launched a caustic contest to succeed him.

Forced to explain election results worse than they had expected, some Democratic strategists said there was little they could have done, given Bush's stature and the national mood. "This election was a referendum on a popular wartime president, and the wind was in our face," said Rep. Nita M. Lowey, D-N.Y., chairwoman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "Thus far, voters have concluded that September 11 caused the economic downturn we are dealing with now. Voters haven't blamed Republicans for the economy-yet."

But, reflecting a level of disarray, some discouraged Democrats were quick to identify causes-including themselves-for their election failures. "There's no question the Democrats didn't present a crisp enough difference" between the parties, especially on "quality of life" issues, said Rep. Benjamin Cardin, D-Md. And Rep. Robert T. Matsui, D-Calif., complained: "We just didn't get it together. First it was prescription drugs, then Social Security, then corporate governance. We hopped around from one issue to the next."

Democrats have struggled to replace the advantage of commanding the bully pulpit during the eight years of the Clinton presidency. "I've heard my leader [Gephardt] be very passionate when he's talking to the troops," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill. "But that's different than being willing to devise a national strategy."

Republican Rigor

House rules give presidents the opportunity for expedited action in that chamber, in contrast to the often balky and talky Senate. The House's legislative efficiency was balm to Bush's tax-cut proposal during the president's early months in office.

Moreover, even with their narrow majority, House Republicans have achieved consensus on most major issues during the past two years-with the notable exception of this year's appropriations gridlock. Piling up the House-passed bills on the Senate's doorstep was integral to the GOP's persistent attack on Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle, D-S.D., for blocking legislative action, according to Terry Holt, spokesman for retiring House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas.

"We've been steady with our message. It's been easy to figure out what we are for," said Holt. "Even though it's not been a national campaign, voters have a better idea of what Republicans stand for than with the Democrats.... One party defined the agenda, while the other was 'me, too.' "

Republicans found it particularly helpful that Democrats were unable to coalesce around a national message of criticizing the Bush tax cut; many moderate-to-conservative Democrats in competitive campaigns voted for the tax cut last year. "We were never in position to get unanimity among Democrats" on tax cuts, which created disincentives for a possible partisan response, acknowledged Howard Wolfson, the DCCC's executive director. GOP insiders said that the paralysis among both House and Senate Democrats prevented them from rallying behind a uniform budget alternative-and it fueled Republicans' confidence that they were on the right political track.

Rep. Nancy L. Johnson, R-Conn.-who survived a redistricting-forced challenge from Rep. James H. Maloney, D-Conn.-said that she and other GOP moderates have been able to rely on their party leaders to protect their interests. "When we first took the majority [in 1994], there was a feeling among conservatives that, over time, they could construct a majority

that's in their image," Johnson said. "But it's become clear that there are regional differences."

Johnson praised House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, who is set to take over as majority leader in the new Congress, for responding to GOP members who have objected to debating some measures. "I have confidence in Tom DeLay, because he listens to the moderates," Johnson said. "When you're in the leadership, you cannot run your own agenda. You have to run an agenda that reflects the views of the Caucus."

GOP leaders have insisted that they have not demanded lockstep uniformity from their members. In fact, Rep. Jim Leach, R-Iowa, bolstered his once-faltering re-election campaign this fall when he spoke out against the congressional resolution to back Bush's use of military force in Iraq. "The voters appreciated it," Davis said.

Democratic Disarray

It didn't take long after the election for House Democrats to start reassessing their situation. By nightfall on November 6, several media outlets, citing unnamed sources, were reporting that Gephardt planned to announce the next day that he would step down as party leader, a move that had been expected among House Democrats for months. Soon after, Democratic Caucus Chairman Martin Frost of Texas issued a statement that praised Gephardt's service to the party and announced his candidacy for the position. And soon after that, Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., issued a similar statement of her own.

Earlier on November 6, some Democrats-including supposed Gephardt allies-said that it was time for him to step down and that his successor should be someone who would more actively consult the Democratic Caucus in reaching important decisions. "It's obvious that we need some fresh faces and, in some cases, fresh ideas," Rep. Harold E. Ford Jr., D-Tenn., said on Don Imus's national radio show.

Many Democrats remained bitter that Gephardt had worked with White House officials this fall to craft a resolution on Iraq that supported the administration's position. A Democratic member commented that, with Gephardt's interest in a possible presidential candidacy, "we need to move beyond the uncertainty."

The contest shaping up between Pelosi and Frost for minority leader poses a stark choice for House Democrats. Allies

view the more liberal Pelosi as dynamic and media-savvy, and they contend that she has superior skills in dealing with people. "She would make a very exciting and charismatic leader, and that's what we need," Schakowsky said. "Someone who is very clear and unapologetic."

Foes, however, contend that Pelosi lacks the requisite experience and political judgment for the top leadership post. They note, for instance, that a few months ago, a California ally set up a new political action committee in Pelosi's name to collect and distribute campaign funds. But when it was reported that the new PAC's activities apparently duplicated those of an existing Pelosi PAC and thus might be illegal, the Pelosi camp shut it down. Others from outside California have questioned whether Pelosi and other Democratic members of the state's delegation made questionable political judgments last year in cutting a bipartisan deal on redistricting.

Separately, some House Democrats were angered-and baffled-by Pelosi's decision to side with Rep. Lynn Rivers when redistricting forced Rivers to run, unsuccessfully, in the Michigan Democratic primary this summer against Rep. John D. Dingell, the dean of the House and the senior Democrat on the Energy and Commerce Committee.

Frost, too, brings potential strengths and weaknesses to a leadership bid. He has had longer service than Pelosi in Democratic leadership offices, including four years as DCCC chairman, plus lengthy experience working with Democratic members across the nation on redistricting battles as chairman of IMPAC 2000. Like Pelosi, Frost is a ranking Democrat on a House committee; he serves on Rules, while she has held the top slot at the Permanent Select Intelligence panel. Both Frost and Pelosi have been active party fundraisers for many years, raising many millions of dollars annually for various party activities.

Critics contend that Frost is a more plodding persona, and that he would bring less skill as a party spokesman to outside groups; the need for such outreach may be greater now that Democrats' legislative influence has been weakened by the election results. As a Rules Committee member, Frost has focused his legislative activities chiefly on the nuts and bolts of House procedure, rather than on major policy initiatives.

In addition, Frost-like Gephardt-supported the resolution authorizing force in Iraq, unexpectedly landing him in the

minority among House Democrats, and at odds with Pelosi and the party's more-liberal members. Pelosi supporters contend that she will defeat Frost easily in a Caucus showdown, which is scheduled to take place by secret ballot on November 14.

Meanwhile, in a move designed to foment further Democratic divisions, House Republicans in recent days have raised the possibility that one or more Democratic members might seek to switch parties-partly because of the internal divisions made evident by the Pelosi-Frost contest. Of the GOP's several prime targets, most are from the South. For moderate Democrats, the leadership choice "will have implications on which way they go," Davis said. Voicing some concern, the DCCC's Wolfson said that the potential loss of party switchers is "obviously something the leadership has to worry about."