

Stage is Set for Pelosi-Frost Face-Off October 18th, 2002

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House Democrats describe the Nov. 5 midterm elections as critical to the future of the nation. But an election that could occur weeks or months later -- the one that will select the next Democratic leader of the House -- could have an equal impact on the party.

Many assume that Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt, Mo., will not remain in that job after the elections, no matter what the outcome. If Democrats reclaim the majority, he is expected to become Speaker for a brief time before launching a bid for the presidency in 2004. If Republicans remain in the majority, Gephardt could leave his post sooner.

Gephardt's departure would set the stage for a race between Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi, Calif., and Democratic Caucus Chairman Martin Frost, Texas -- a contest that would highlight the party's ideological divide, pitting the more liberal Pelosi against a longtime leader with ties to moderates and conservatives. "Both of them ask Gephardt every morning, 'How are you feeling today, Dick?'" said a Democratic lawmaker who asked not to be named.

"There will be a Nancy-Martin race for something," said Chris John, D-La. "I think that race is going to happen."

Pelosi backer Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., said "my assumption and hope is that she will run for the position [of leader]," adding that having a woman in the top spot would be important because the current structure is dominated by white men.

Democratic leadership aides said Frost plans to run for the highest leadership post that's open, while Pelosi has deferred talk of moving up until after the elections.

Pelosi said her focus is on winning back the majority, but she hinted that she has collected enough support to beat Frost if the two square off. "I feel very comfortable about what opportunities exist," Pelosi said, adding that she would make an announcement "at the appropriate time."

Still, rank-and-file members cannot avoid the topic, and some privately say the race could get nasty.

A Pelosi-Frost race would be a replay of Frost's 1998 contest with Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., for the top caucus job -- with greater implications. Frost won that race, in part, by emphasizing that he was better-positioned to reach out to ideological factions within the party.

DeLauro, one of her party's more liberal members, is now running against caucus Vice

Chairman Robert Menendez, N.J., for Frost's position, which is term-limited. One of DeLauro's campaign tenets is broader representation in the leadership for women, a theme also expected in a Pelosi candidacy.

"The caucus needs a profile that looks like the rest of the country," said Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif. "It can't be all white male."

Ideological Dimension

Frost can count on the backing of many Democrats from his home state, plus party conservatives and moderates. John D. Dingell, Mich., the House's longest-serving member, cited Frost as a "superior leader" in comparison with Pelosi. The California Democrat angered Dingell by contributing to the campaign of his primary opponent, fellow Rep. Lynn Rivers, whom he defeated after a vigorous campaign.

Pelosi, meanwhile, won a hotly contested race for whip last year against Steny H. Hoyer, Md., becoming the House's highest-ranking woman. Hoyer has announced he will run for whip again should Pelosi move up the leadership ladder, and he claims to have enough publicly committed votes to ensure his victory.

But Hoyer has also promised not to challenge Pelosi, according to Democratic aides. So if she were to lose to Frost in the leader's race, she could run again for whip without a challenge from Hoyer.

Pelosi's supporters point to her fundraising prowess and ability to serve as a spokeswoman for the party. Several Democrats predicted Pelosi would win going away and would quickly patch up differences within the caucus.

"A Frost-Pelosi race could present two different approaches to governing, two different styles," said Harold E. Ford Jr., Tenn. "But I think the caucus would be mature enough to look at all the issues."

Democrats say that both lawmakers have proven themselves able leaders. But where Pelosi backers see her "making strong gains every day," in the words of James P. Moran, Va., Frost's supporters point to his success as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in the mid-1990s and later as Caucus Chairman and head of redistricting efforts in 2000.

"He's not a flashy operator in every sense of the word, but he thinks a problem through, he's got a strategy, he's a task master, he knows how to debate," said Charlie Gonzalez, Texas.

Frost and Pelosi have agreed on 85.2 percent of the House roll-call votes they have cast since Democrats became the minority party in 1995. And both have agreed with Gephardt more often than with each other. Pelosi and Gephardt have been together on 89.3 percent of votes; Frost and Gephardt have agreed on 87.5 percent.

Many disagreements between Frost and Pelosi have come on defense issues, the most recent being the vote on authorizing use of force against Iraq (H J Res 114 -- PL 107-243). Frost supported the resolution, while Pelosi opposed it.

The two have come down on opposite sides 80 times on defense authorization or appropriations votes since 1994, mostly on amendments and procedural votes but occasionally on final passage of legislation.

In addition, votes on trade with China, flag desecration and even whether to distribute Independent Counsel Kenneth W. Starr's report on President Bill Clinton have split the two lawmakers.

Many liberals feel a Pelosi victory is almost a certainty. Barney Frank, Mass., said Pelosi would win "easily" in a race for Democratic leader or Speaker if Gephardt steps aside.

Moderates in the Middle

But the ideological differences between Pelosi and Frost make the choice between them tougher for moderates who previously have supported Pelosi in leadership races, such as David Phelps, Ill.

Phelps voted for the Iraq resolution, as did many Democrats from rural areas where support for President Bush runs high. The choice between a San Francisco liberal and Texan Frost is fraught with political calculations.

"It would be tough for the Blue Dogs," Phelps said, referring to the coalition of mostly Southern Democrats on the right of the caucus.

An illustration of the difficulty that Pelosi's political identity poses for certain Democrats can be found in Alabama. In the race for an open 3rd District seat, the Republican opponent of Democratic candidate Joe Turnham is running a television ad that features shots of Pelosi and former Vice President Al Gore, saying Turnham agrees with the "Washington liberals."

The situation is complicated by the Nov. 5 elections. To win back the majority, Democrats must gain six seats, and those pickups likely would be in mostly rural or suburban districts.

"What kind of seats will those be?" asked Democrat Bart Stupak, who represents a mostly rural section of northern Michigan. "They're not going to be urban seats, and that bodes well for Martin Frost. Maybe our leadership ought to reflect that new aspect."

A Democratic victory would most likely lead Gephardt to begin the 108th Congress as Speaker, with Pelosi and Frost competing for majority leader as Hoyer claims the whip's spot. The spoils available to the majority party would quickly soothe any hard feelings from the leadership contest.

"If we don't win the majority back, all bets are off," said Louisiana's John, a Blue Dog

co-chairman. "You'll see an uprising."

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