

Pelosi Brings New Style to Caucus

March 17th, 2003

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Roll Call

In the 10 weeks since California Rep. Nancy Pelosi took the helm in the House Democratic Caucus, one thing has become abundantly clear to her colleagues: She is more than just a fresh face.

Aggressive and political, hands-on and decisive, Minority Leader Pelosi has quickly demonstrated a clean break with the style of leadership her predecessor, Rep. Richard Gephardt (Mo.), employed in his eight years atop the party's leadership. She rewards her allies, shuns open promises and is a stickler for Caucus rules.

Unlike Gephardt, who was willing to delegate authority and sometimes bent over backward to keep the Caucus' various factions content, she consults just a handful of Members when formulating positions and keeps a tight lid on her plans. At the same time, the unabashed liberal is adamant about getting out front of Republicans on major policy proposals in the hope of giving the public a clear alternative between the two parties.

Most House Democrats view her approach as a marked departure from the one Gephardt took in his eight years of stewardship before stepping down as Minority Leader last fall in the wake of a midterm election that left Democrats with setbacks in both the House and Senate. Gephardt, who has been a fixture in the Democratic leadership since 1984 and occupied the top spot since 1995, is now pursuing his party's 2004 presidential nomination.

Members say the jury is still out on whether Pelosi's approach will translate into wins at the ballot box, but allies and foes alike give her credit for working hard to grow into the role of leader and are willing to give her time to sink or swim. Even though Gephardt was popular and well-respected, House Democrats were hungry for new leadership.

"Members were ready for a change from Gephardt," said one veteran Democrat. "Whichever direction it would have gone."

"She's a fresh face, and a positive difference," said Rep. John Spratt (D-S.C.), now assistant leader under Pelosi and a longtime Gephardt lieutenant. "That is vitally important to a party that has lost several elections in a row. She clearly has this spirit about her that gets communicated to all of us."

Members say privately that part of the excitement around Pelosi - beyond the fact that she is the new leader - is a renewed attention paid to the interests of individual House Democrats. Gephardt, they say, had begun to shift his focus to his next challenge months before he stepped down as leader to concentrate on his looming White House bid.

"Gephardt grew so big at the end of his term it was hard for him to devote that kind of attention," said one Democratic Member.

Pelosi, by all accounts, is focused squarely on being the leader and Members and aides say she is attentive to the smallest details while actively managing all of the decisions emanating from her office.

"She's taken a very hands-on approach, but at the same time given people the feeling that they are being included more," said the veteran Democrat.

Spratt added: "She takes on the tough decisions and doesn't dodge them or delegate them to someone else, and she suffers the consequences."

Pelosi did catch flak for her decisions in making key committee assignments, with her detractors accusing that she used the process to reward her supporters and punish her foes in the jockeying to replace Gephardt. Her partisans view, meanwhile, is that Pelosi showed courage and leadership in making those decisions, and note that she never shrank from taking the heat for disappointing some Members.

Gephardt, by contrast, was sometimes viewed as positioning himself to diffuse criticism by allowing a panel of leaders to dole out committee slots, sources said. Plus, Gephardt was known for overpromising plum slots and liberally waiving limits on committee assignments to appease his Caucus.

Members are closely monitoring the effectiveness of Pelosi's decision to present policy alternatives to Republican initiatives, another break from Gephardt, who was reluctant to make vulnerable and more moderate Democrats walk the plank on sensitive issues. The new leader first moved toward a more confrontational policy approach with an economic stimulus proposal, which was quickly followed by a prescription drug plan. Pelosi is privately pushing Members to put forward a budget alternative as well, something the leadership declined to offer a year ago.

With that trend, Members are privately optimistic that House Democrats will be able to offer a clear alternative to voters. And that is something, they argue, that hasn't been easily discernible in recent Congresses.

"That's a strategy that has been carefully developed by Nancy Pelosi," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), one of Pelosi's closest friends and confidantes. "We have a clear agenda as Democrats that makes sure to distinguish us."

But Pelosi won't necessarily throw herself into a debate just to start a fight. It was only recently, after a trip to the Middle East, that she became more vocal in her opposition to a possible war in Iraq, a major point of division within the Caucus. Pelosi has also given a wide berth to the idea of filing an ethics complaint against Rep. Mike Oxley (R-Ohio) and his staff for allegedly trying to pressure a mutual fund association into removing its Democratic lobbyist.

Policy alternatives and issues aside, Members and aides said the starkest difference between Pelosi and Gephardt is the way in which they make decisions.

While Gephardt took his time formulating a position, Pelosi tends to move expeditiously. Also, Gephardt was known for consulting a wide group of advisers - even holding several extended leadership meetings a week - while Pelosi has kept a tighter circle made up of her closest friends and top leaders.

"Nancy is very disciplined, and she's very decisive in the sense that she likes to reach conclusions in meetings or decisions - she always has that goal," said Rep. Robert Matsui (Calif.), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "Dick was a little different, he could leave a meeting without anyone knowing his decision and the decision would come down later. That's the most significant contrast between the two styles."

"Their styles are different," agreed another Democratic Member, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "While she goes through the motions of listening, I think she's predetermined where she wants to be most of that time."

"Gephardt could be moved in a different direction if he felt the majority of the Caucus was in a different place," the Member added.

But others insist Pelosi, while a liberal philosophically, has worked hard to sit on the sidelines and listen to opposing views as to not sway the Caucus. That's akin to the approach of her predecessor, a moderate who was known for holding extensive listening sessions with Members on issues.

"She's listened to moderates and conservatives and hasn't tried to impose her district's views on the Caucus," said another Democratic Member, referring to the leader's San Francisco political base. "I think she's trying to listen to moderates and conservatives, but it is early yet to say how successful she'll be in bridging divergent views in the Caucus."

"She's trying to reach out, and she's doing a good job at it," added Rep. Harold Ford Jr.

(D-Tenn.), who challenged Pelosi for the leader job last November. "It's not easy."

Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), who lost a Whip race to Pelosi in October 2001, said it will take time for Pelosi to refine her approach, noting that Gephardt was in charge for nearly a decade and developed his style over the course of his tenure.

"It's very early," Hoyer said. "We not really going to know exactly how she's going to lead until she's done it for some period of time."