

Schakowsky, Sandlin fill out Dem Whip team The Hill

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By J.P. Cassidy

The House Democrats' two newest chief deputy whips come from different parts of the country and opposite ends of the political spectrum, but they have more than a little in common.

Rep. Max Sandlin (Texas) is a member of the conservative Blue Dog Coalition, and Rep. Jan Schakowsky (Ill.) is part of the Progressive Caucus. But the two share a populist streak, workhorse reputations, fundraising prowess and, most important, unquestioned loyalty to new Democratic Whip Nancy Pelosi (Calif.).

Expanding the whip team to six, Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (Mo.) last week named Sandlin and Schakowsky to join holdover whips Maxine Waters (Calif.), Ed Pastor (Ariz.), Chet Edwards (Texas) and John Lewis (Ga.). Under Pelosi's predecessor, David Bonior (Mich.), the title of chief deputy was viewed as largely ornamental. Before Bonior became whip, the chief deputy job was held by one person, who actually had some power. But to satisfy the diverse ideological, geographic, and ethnic groups in the caucus, the position was split into four jobs, diluting the power of each deputy. As two of Pelosi's earliest and most enthusiastic supporters, Sandlin and Schakowsky are unlikely to be viewed as tokens. In the whip race, both split apart coalitions that might have united against Pelosi.

The job places both on the leadership ladder, even though Sandlin is only in his third term and Schakowsky in her second. Other bright young stars who have moved up to higher posts include Robert Menendez (N.J.), Rosa DeLauro (Conn.) and Bonior. Indeed, Sandlin was considered a likely candidate for the vice chair post opening up at the end of the year, and he may still run, though he has postponed his decision out of deference to his fellow Blue Dogs.

"The Blue Dogs have decided not to take a position in any of the races," Sandlin said. "But the current leadership races are in an almost permanent stall. The law of inertia is in play. Right now, that's all I can say."

Sandlin has prior experience as a whip, and not just for Pelosi's campaign. "I was elected president of my freshman class," Sandlin said. "Later, I was appointed as a whip-at-large. So I have done this sort of work since my first day in Congress."

Though Schakowsky has no experience as a whip, she earned a reputation as a fierce and fearless advocate for progressive issues within months of her arrival on Capitol Hill. While Sandlin and other Democrats from swing districts applauded Gephardt's decision not to revisit the tax cut, Schakowsky was an outspoken critic. "I think there's an inevitability that as we get into the budget debate and look at the choices we

have to make, we'll have to take a look at taxes, and I'm not the first Democrat to raise that point," Schakowsky said.

Schakowsky may be new to Congress, but she has extensive experience in the Illinois State House and as a consumer advocate and grassroots organizer in Chicago politics.

"I was in the state Legislature for eight years before coming to Congress," Schakowsky said. "But I got my start in politics in a grocery store about 30 years ago. You know when you check those expiration dates on gallons of milk? Those weren't always there."

Freshness dates at the time were encoded so that consumers couldn't tell when a product expired. Schakowsky and five other young housewives interrogated clerks to get the codes, and then put them in a handbook, which sold some 25,000 copies.

One of the companies started printing clear expiration dates, which became a competitive advantage for them, and the practice spread through the industry. "It was so empowering, that we thought, 'What else can we change?'" she said.

Like Pelosi, Schakowsky says she focuses on "bread-and-butter, kitchen table issues."

Sandlin shares that approach, introducing a bill last year to cap the interest rates on credit cards. But Sandlin generally keeps business interests happy, which is reflected in his 66 percent approval rating by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the \$1.7 million he raised in the last election cycle. A prolific fundraiser, Schakowsky was introduced to even more donors last fall in a friendly write-up in The Wall Street Journal. She heads up the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's women's outreach program, called Women LEAD, which raked in a record-shattering \$7.3 million in 2001.

Reflecting on the advocacy that keeps her popular at home and the pragmatism that attracts money, Schakowsky said that show horse and workhorse reputations are compatible. "I think all of us project issues that reflect our districts and ourselves at times, and then pull together as a team at others," Schakowsky said. "And I just look forward to the opportunity to work with our new whip and be part of the team."