

State Won't Be Lacking for Influence in Capitol

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After fellow senators swore their oaths of office and then headed out for celebrations Thursday, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) remained behind to give a simple, direct address articulating Democratic goals for the new Congress.

The Senate chamber was mostly empty, but as second in command in the Senate, Durbin was laying out a game plan that could drive the public debate in the capital for the remainder of the Bush administration and possibly beyond.

"The American people have given us today a rare opportunity in our history," Durbin said, speaking to the gallery and the American public. "If we don't achieve results, if we don't show a good faith effort toward compromise and cooperation, they will be harsh in their judgment two years from now. And we'd deserve it."

It was a symbolic moment for the veteran lawmaker, who this week takes on not only the role of assistant majority leader in the Senate but also as a key architect and spokesman for the Democratic message.

As the Democrats take over control of Congress, the power shift also sees Durbin becoming the highest-ranking member of the Illinois delegation. The position carries an added responsibility because of the loss of the powerful House speaker's post by Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), displaced when Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California took the position Thursday.

Several other Illinois Democrats also ascended to significant positions with the start of the 110th Congress. Rep. Rahm Emanuel, credited by many with orchestrating key Democratic wins in House races last fall, becomes Democratic Caucus chairman and an important adviser to Pelosi.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a confidant of Pelosi, will serve in the House leadership as a chief deputy majority whip, while other state lawmakers stand to become influential chairmen of subcommittees when they are organized in the coming days. Illinois members serve on the heavyweight House Ways and Means Committee, as well as appropriations and transportation committees.

And there is another ascendant member of the delegation who doesn't derive his authority from any rank in the Senate. Democratic leaders sent Sen. Barack Obama to preside over the Senate's proceedings for a while on Thursday afternoon.

His best-selling book and possible run for the White House in 2008 bespeak a prominence that could translate into outsize influence for a first-term senator in an institution driven by tradition and seniority.

The breadth of the delegation's influence could help make up for the loss of the speaker's office, by rule the single most powerful position in Congress.

"Our delegation's power comes in the fact that we're well-organized and we get along," Emanuel said as he hustled through the House corridors. "Nothing can put you on par with having the speaker. . . . But we have people in key positions in both the Senate and the House. It was a team effort before and it will be a team effort now."

Much of Thursday was devoted to pomp and circumstance, with many members clutching their Bibles and posing for pictures. Durbin had almost a dozen lawmakers on his schedule of people to visit and congratulate.

But as he hurried from one office to another, he was thinking about the work to come. He also squeezed in six television interviews, in which he echoed promises from his floor speech. Democrats will work to make college more affordable, tighten ethics rules and expand access to health care, he said.

They'll also scrutinize the administration's handling of the war in Iraq, he said, calling witnesses to hearings and seeking documents on how decisions are being made.

"We don't want confrontation over this, but we do want the information," Durbin said. "We hope they'll cooperate."

As for Illinois' muscle in Congress, Durbin said Hastert's descent from the speaker's chair is a blow. Republicans lost their majority in the midterm elections, and Hastert returned to a seat among the rank-and-file as the new Congress convened.

Still, he said, he's not worried about how the state will fare.

"I've been through this team rebuilding in the past," he said, recalling the days when Reps. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.) and Bob Michel (R-Ill.) carried a lot of weight in the Capitol. "Then came a new generation. . . . We'll field a new team, a strong team. We have strengths that others didn't

have, and in some areas we won't be as strong. But that's the nature of this place."

To be sure, the Democrats' new power in Congress is not an unbridled one. Their majority in the Senate is slim--a 51-49 margin--and President Bush remains in the White House.

Still, Durbin said he intends to seize his new opportunity.

"You always sit around and speculate about what you might do if you had the majority," Durbin said. "And now we have a chance to do it."