

US Congress opens under Democratic control

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The 111th Congress opened Tuesday with the Democratic Party in firm control of both houses. Nancy Pelosi was reelected Speaker of the House of Representatives by a margin of 255 to 174, reflecting the 21-seat gain made by the Democrats in the November 4 elections.

The Democrats hold 256 House seats to 178 for the Republicans, with one seat vacated by Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, who will be White House chief of staff in the Obama administration. The open seat in northwest Chicago will undoubtedly be filled by a Democrat in a special election, giving the Democrats a total of 257 seats.

In the Senate, an incoming group of 34 took the oath of office from outgoing vice president Dick Cheney. These included five new Democratic senators who replaced or defeated Republicans, giving the Democrats a 55 to 41 majority, with two independents who vote with the Democrats, and two vacancies, both likely to be filled by Democrats. That would give the Democrats an effective 59-41 majority.

The Democratic congressional leadership has bemoaned its failure to reach the 60-vote margin in the Senate required to overcome a filibuster, in order to excuse in advance the right-wing policies that will be pursued by the Obama administration.

Obama himself has gone even further, in the name of “bipartisanship,” claiming he needs to get 80 votes in the Senate for his stimulus plan, thus insuring that the right wing of the Republican Party has veto power over economic policy, despite the repudiation of the Republicans at the polls two months ago.

This so-called 60-vote threshold, while discussed

endlessly by the media, is a transparent pretext for Obama abandoning the reformist pretenses of his election campaign on issues like health care, education, the environment and increasing taxes on the wealthy.

In reality, the Democrats enjoy top-heavy majorities that would allow them to enact policies without a single Republican vote. The Democratic majority in the House is the largest for either party since 1994. The Democratic majority in the Senate is the largest for either party since 1978.

During the 12 years of Republican control of the House, from 1995 to 2006, the Republican majority ranged between 221 and 230 out of 435 seats, far less than the incoming Democratic majority. The Republicans prevailed on virtually every policy question not because of their numbers, because they were more determined and ruthless in serving the interests of the US ruling elite.

The Democrats are equally subservient to the dictates of the corporate oligarchy, but they play a different role, acting as the safety valve for popular discontent and posturing as the defenders of working people and the poor, while opposing any measures that would genuinely help the vast majority of the population. This is what lends a two-faced and half-hearted character to their political performance, both in opposition and in power.

For example, the Democratic majority in the last Congress—larger than the Republican majority that impeached President Clinton—failed to take any action against the crimes of the Bush administration. There was no cutoff of funds for the war in Iraq, and Congress did not even mount a major investigation into such events as the launching of the illegal war, the

promotion of an official policy of torture, or the government response to Hurricane Katrina.

The Democratic Party's spinelessness in the face of Republican opposition, or even criticism, was demonstrated at the opening session of the Senate regarding the vacancies that resulted from the decision of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to bar two Democrats from taking seats to which they were legally entitled.

One vacancy was created by the resignation of Barack Obama after his election as president. On December 30, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich nominated the former state attorney general, 71-year-old Roland Burris, to fill the vacancy. Reid instructed Senate personnel not to seat Burris because of the criminal charges brought against Blagojevich, which include the claim that he sought to sell the Senate appointment.

No indictment has yet been brought against the governor, despite massive publicity given to the charges filed by US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald. Last week Fitzgerald asked a federal judge to give him an additional 90 days before seeking a grand jury indictment, an indication that the case against Blagojevich is less than solid.

While the Democratic-controlled Illinois state legislature has begun hearings on a possible impeachment of Blagojevich, no action has been taken and he continues to exercise all the powers of his office, including those related to federal elections, most recently, in setting the date for a special election to fill the seat of Rep. Rahm Emanuel, who will be Obama's chief of staff.

While most legal experts cited in the media agree that the governor's appointment of Burris is within his powers, and there has been no allegation of corrupt relations between Burris, who has been out of office for six years, and Blagojevich, Reid and the Senate Democratic leadership are frightened of the Republican and media barrage that would follow the seating of Burris.

The other Senate vacancy is an even clearer demonstration of political cowardice. It is the result of the protracted recount of the election in Minnesota, which ended Monday with the state canvassing board declaring Democrat Al Franken the victor over incumbent Republican Norm Coleman, by a margin of 225 votes, with 1,212,431 votes for Franken and 1,212,206 for Coleman.

In the normal course of events, such an action would be definitive. Franken would be seated, while Coleman pursues an appeal through the state courts, as is his right. Such a procedure was followed most recently in 1997, when Democrat Mary Landrieu was seated as the senator from Louisiana, while her Republican opponent pursued an unsuccessful court challenge. Notably, Landrieu's seating required the consent of then Majority Leader Trent Lott, a Republican from Mississippi, because the Republicans controlled the Senate.

Today, a Democratic majority has decided not to seat an elected Democrat in deference to the court challenge filed by his defeated Republican opponent. Reid cited Republican threats of filibusters and other procedural delays as one reason for refusing to seat Franken immediately as the senator from Minnesota.

An attorney for Coleman indicated that the Republican senator would cite the Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* as part of his appeal. He will be making an argument that because different counties in Minnesota used different standards to decide on whether to accept or reject challenged absentee ballots, the state election process is a violation of equal protection provisions—the same argument made by the Bush campaign in Florida in 2000.



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