

As new Congress is sworn in: Democrats signal readiness to work with Trump

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In remarks delivered during the opening session of the 115th US Congress, top Democrats emphasized their willingness to work with the incoming Trump administration. Rather than warn the American people—including the majority of voters who cast ballots for Trump’s opponents, and mainly for Democrat Hillary Clinton—the Democrats signaled their desire to collaborate with Trump and his cabinet of right-wing ideologues, billionaires and retired generals.

The tone was set in the speech delivered by Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer after he was formally installed as top Senate Democrat during the upper chamber’s opening session. With the Republicans holding only a narrow 52-48 majority in the Senate, where most actions require a 60-vote super-majority, Schumer will be the most powerful Democrat in Washington after Obama leaves the White House.

Schumer has already signaled his desire to work cooperatively with the new Trump administration, giving a series of interviews in which he recalled his past friendly relations with the Manhattan billionaire, who was a regular donor to Schumer’s congressional and US Senate campaigns.

A profile published in *Politico* noted that Schumer has created a much broader leadership structure for Senate Democrats than his predecessor Harry Reid, incorporating figures on the right wing of the Democratic caucus, including Mark Warner of Virginia, a telecommunications multimillionaire before winning a Senate seat, and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, who was interviewed several times by Trump for a potential cabinet appointment.

Joining Manchin and Warner are former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts liberal Elizabeth Warren, chosen to provide a “left” cover for any deals the Democrats make with Trump on such issues as infrastructure or trade. Schumer himself has expressed enthusiasm for an infrastructure deal, telling ABC News, “We think it should be large. He’s mentioned a trillion dollars. I told him that sounded good to me.”

On a parallel track, the AFL-CIO and several House Democrats said Tuesday they were urging Trump to go forward with his pledge to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka called NAFTA “a political failure and a policy disaster,” declaring, “We are ready to fix it.”

The union executive is urging American workers to see workers in Canada and Mexico as their enemies, not the billionaire capitalist who is about to enter the White House, and his coterie of semi-fascists, fellow billionaires and ex-generals.

Schumer has ostentatiously distanced himself from the Obama administration’s most recent policy initiative on Israel, joining with Trump in denouncing the decision not to veto a UN Security Council resolution critical of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, and blasting the speech delivered by Secretary of State John Kerry in which he criticized Israel’s policy on settlements.

In his speech Tuesday, Schumer combined rhetoric about defending “the American people, the middle class and those struggling to get there” with advice to Trump on how to explain and carry out his policies more effectively. While he claimed that the Democrats would hold Trump “accountable,” Schumer suggested that there was considerable “common ground” for action, including infrastructure investments and protectionist trade policies. He lent credence to Trump’s cynical campaign talk of protecting Medicare and Social Security, offering to work with him on the issue.

The Democratic leader warned Trump against adopting ready-made the policies of the congressional Republican right, saying these were “pro-corporation, pro-elite policies diametrically opposed to the many campaign themes that helped you win working class votes.” Schumer lectured that if Trump were to do that—as though there was any question about it—“your presidency will not succeed.”

The *New York Post* reported last weekend that Trump had told Schumer he liked him better than the Republican Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, or Republican House

Speaker Paul Ryan. Asked about this report, Schumer told CNN that Trump said “something close to it.”

Most notable about Schumer’s first speech as Democratic leader was the fact that he criticized Trump mainly on a relatively minor question—his obsessive use of Twitter—not on the substance of his policies. He denounced “government by Twitter,” but not the most right-wing government in American history, pledged to destroy social programs, slash taxes for the wealthy, attack democratic rights and build up the military-police apparatus.

Schumer seemed most concerned that Trump’s occasional Twitter outbursts in the early morning hours could destabilize world financial markets, something the New York senator’s Wall Street backers find unsettling. Schumer has collected more campaign contributions from the financial industry than any nonpresidential candidate in modern history.

Senate Republicans have clearly taken Schumer’s measure, suggesting he will be a far more cooperative figure than Reid. McConnell, speaking with reporters after the November 8 election, said, “I think what the American people are looking for is results. And to get results in the Senate, as all of you know, it requires some Democratic participation and cooperation.”

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi was equally conciliatory in her briefer and less publicized remarks, delivered in the form of a salute to House Speaker Paul Ryan after the right-wing Republican defeated her by a margin of 239 to 190 in the contest for the leadership of the House of Representatives.

Pelosi hailed Ryan’s supposed intellectual abilities (he is a long-time devotee of ultra-right writer Ayn Rand) and his long service in the House, as an intern, employee and congressional aide before winning a seat at the age of 28. The simpering tone of her tribute reflected the fundamental unity of the two capitalist parties, whose conflicts represent, in President Obama’s words, an “intramural scrimmage” between teams that are on the same side: the side of the financial oligarchy.

Pelosi herself is married to a real estate mogul and venture capitalist, Paul Pelosi, worth more than \$50 million. Whatever happens in Washington, no matter how devastating for the working class, Madame Pelosi will go unscathed, and her husband will likely profit.

Pelosi and Ryan, though of different generations, have spent a combined 46 years in the House of Representatives without ever facing a significant challenge at the polls. The stagnant and inbred character of this body is shown by the fact that in 2016, despite the political upheavals in the presidential campaign, 380 of the 393 House incumbents won reelection, a victory rate of nearly 97 percent.

Like Schumer, Pelosi declared that House Democrats would seek common ground with Trump “wherever they can,” based on the incoming president’s demagogic pledges to help American workers. She vowed to “stand our ground” on Medicare, Social Security, Obamacare, the environment and civil rights—an empty pledge that she and her fellow Democrats are preparing to break in the coming weeks and months. Significantly missing from her litany was Medicaid, the government health program for the poor, which is believed to be the first major target for budget cutting by the Trump administration and the Republican majority in Congress.

The sole concrete action of the first day of the 115th Congress was an incident that could be indicative of the future. The House Republican caucus sparked a media firestorm by voting Monday night to effectively dismantle the Office of Congressional Ethics, the independent agency set up in 2008 to investigate charges against sitting congressmen, referring them for action, if necessary, to the House Ethics Committee.

Even the limited powers of this body were too much for the now-ascendant Republicans, who voted by 119-74 in a closed-door meeting to gut the OCE’s investigative authority. Congressional Democrats immediately denounced the action as a “betrayal” of Trump’s pledge to “drain the swamp” in Washington, a piece of demagoguery employed at the candidate’s rallies during the final month of the presidential campaign. Trump himself joined the attack, deploring the House Republican action in two Twitter posts. By Tuesday afternoon, the House Republicans had unanimously reversed themselves.

While the episode had a somewhat farcical character, it showed the potential for future collaboration between the Democrats and the Trump White House on issues of much greater importance.

Another clear signal of the Democrats’ readiness to collaborate with the ultra-right Trump administration was the announcement Tuesday that Bill and Hillary Clinton would attend Trump’s inauguration.



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