



Boehner poised to take speakership

November 3, 2010

By John Fritze and Fredreka Schouten, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Rep. John Boehner has long kept a telling piece of art on the wall of his Capitol Hill office: a portrait of the last Ohioan to serve as speaker of the House, conservative Nicholas Longworth.

As Republicans are set to take control of the House in January after the party's broad electoral success, the former plastics salesman — known for his pricey suits, perpetual tan and 10 p.m. bedtime — is poised to follow Longworth, 80 years later, to the highest perch in Congress. Hours after the GOP won the House majority and loosened Democrats' grip on the Senate, Boehner declared a legislative mandate and set his sights on stopping President Obama's sweeping health care law.

"The American people were concerned about the government takeover of health care," Boehner said Wednesday. "I think it's important for us to lay the groundwork before we begin to repeal this monstrosity."

Boehner, who was first elected in 1990 and who has served as House minority leader since 2007, is already under attack from Democrats, including Obama, who cast him as more comfortable around lobbyists than voters. Supporters counter that the gregarious, Camel-smoking leader has never lost touch with his blue-collar beginnings.

"The guy is so misunderstood," said Rep. Patrick Tiberi, R-Ohio, who says he considers Boehner a mentor. "He has never been given anything — he's had to earn everything that he has." If Boehner is elected to the powerful post by his colleagues, he will become second in line to the presidency, set the policy and political agenda in the House and become Washington's leading Republican voice in opposition to the president.

"My goal has never been to be speaker just for the sake of being speaker, but for the purpose of leading a House that does the right things for the country," Boehner told *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland this year.

A skilled schmoozer, Boehner (pronounced BAY-ner) hosts an annual "beach party" fundraising bash on the Potomac River. He's an avid golfer — ranked among the best in Congress by *Golf Digest* — and courts campaign donors on the links. On the House floor, he'll throw an arm around a colleague and sing his "Boehner Birthday Song." (Complete lyrics: "This is your birthday song. It doesn't last too long. Hey!")

Friends say his relaxed demeanor masks a fierce intelligence and iron discipline. Boehner, whose district on the Ohio-Indiana border includes Cincinnati suburbs, rises early to pore over briefing books and to take a long walk before each workday.

"He's always super-prepared because he's been up since 4 o'clock in the morning reading briefing papers," said Sam Geduldig, a former political director. "The line from the commercial, 'Never let them see you sweat,' that is John Boehner."

Doing odd jobs

Growing up the second of 12 children in a working-class Catholic household outside Cincinnati, Boehner never had the slightest inclination toward politics as a kid, friends said. His father owned a bar, Andy's Café, where a young Boehner mopped floors. He played linebacker at Archbishop Moeller High School for Gerry Faust, who later coached at Notre Dame and the University at Akron.

It took Boehner almost a decade to work his way through Xavier University in Cincinnati as he did odd jobs, from golf caddy to night janitor, to pay his way. Boehner earned a business degree in 1977. He met his wife, Debbie, while cleaning her office.

"He did every crappy job there was," said Jerry Vanden Eynden, a friend of Boehner since grade school. "All we knew was that we needed money, so we went out to work." During college, he took a job at Nucite Sales, a small Cincinnati plastics firm he took over after the owner died. Business soared under Boehner's lead. In a financial disclosure report filed in May, Boehner reported having at least \$1.8 million in assets. He lists himself as a non-compensated officer of the company.

Boehner became president of his neighborhood association and in 1981, at 31, ran successfully to be one of three trustees overseeing his township government. He would go on to serve as a member of the Ohio Legislature from 1985 to 1990.

Carlos Todd, who was elected as a township official the same year as Boehner, said the trustees oversaw big changes, such as putting a township administrator and paramedics in place. Boehner's political career was born. "John definitely had a desire to go farther," Todd said, "to achieve more."

Rise, fall and rise in Congress

Boehner was elected to Congress in 1990 after ousting an incumbent who had been convicted of having sex with a 16-year-old girl. Once in Washington, Boehner joined a group of upstart freshmen Republicans, known as the Gang of Seven, who exposed the names of lawmakers who had overdrafts at the House bank.

His rise was swift. In 1994, Boehner was an architect of the GOP's "Contract with America," the legislative blueprint that helped his party seize control of Congress for the first time in 40 years. When Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich became House speaker the following year, Boehner ascended to chairmanship of the House Republican Conference, the fourth-ranking GOP

position. In that role, Boehner was responsible for crafting the party's message and enforcing discipline within its ranks.

Boehner's downfall also came quickly.

After the party lost seats in the 1998 midterm elections, Republicans ejected Boehner from the leadership ranks. The shakeup, aimed at changing the party's image, installed then-congressman J.C. Watts in the No. 4 role, the first African American to join the GOP leadership in modern times. Unlike Gingrich, Boehner didn't resign from the House. Instead, he worked behind the scenes, delving deeply into obscure health care bills as chairman of a subcommittee and building a reputation as a serious legislator.

"He didn't take his marbles and go home," said Tom Davis, an ex-GOP congressman from Virginia who served with Boehner. "He played team ball."

In exile, Boehner labored to restore his political clout. In the 2000 election, he raised \$1.1 million through a fundraising committee he established to share campaign cash with Republicans, records show. That's more than triple the \$319,000 Boehner collected in 1996 when he was still in the leadership.

His fundraising has soared with his climb back to power. Boehner collected more than \$14.5 million in three fundraising committees in this election cycle — substantially out raising House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as donors banked on a GOP takeover. Overall, he raised \$44 million for his party and candidates in this election, spokesman Michael Steel said.

In 2001, before rejoining the GOP leadership ranks, Boehner took over the chairmanship of the Education and the Workforce Committee. From that post, he worked with Democrats, such as Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, to pass President George W. Bush's top legislative priority, the No Child Left Behind education overhaul law.

Boehner became tearful years later as he described the law's aim of holding schools accountable for the educational achievement of low-income children.

"Every time we've shrunk from the fight over the last 20 years," Boehner told members of The Cincinnati Enquirer editorial board, "the same people lost every single time: poor kids in America."

Delivering for GOP

The legislative achievement helped cement Boehner's reputation as a strategist who could deliver results. In 2006, when Majority Leader Tom DeLay resigned amid scandal, Boehner was elected Republican leader.

If Boehner ascends to the speakership in January, he will be the first House speaker since Rep. Tom Foley, D-Wash., who oversaw the chamber from 1989 to 1994, to have also served at the helm of a committee, according to the Office of the House Historian.

Davis said the bill-writing experience sets Boehner apart. "John understands not just how you drive the car," he said. "He knows how to change the tire. He knows how to lift up under the hood and fix it."

Though allies tout his ability to work across party lines, Boehner has deployed a starkly different strategy from the outset of the Obama administration.

He has been an uncompromising opponent of the president's agenda, persuading all House Republicans to vote against Obama's \$814 million stimulus package last year. The opposition did not block its passage but positioned Republicans as standing firm against what Boehner described as wasteful spending.

"It's not that Boehner decided to oppose the administration," Steel said, "it's that the administration decided not to work with him."

A year later, House Republicans united again to vote against the federal health care law after a fiery Boehner led his caucus in cries of "Hell, no!" on the House floor. Boehner and House Republicans slammed the law as a government takeover of health care and have pledged to repeal it. Among the changes they advocate: expanding a provision allowing consumers to buy health insurance across state lines. The law allows insurers to sell multistate policies only if the states sign formal agreements to do so.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., a Pelosi ally who worked closely with Boehner on the education bill, said Boehner's approach as Republican leader has been to "obstruct, delay, oppose, then repeat the same."

"Our work together on No Child Left Behind was one moment in time that has itself been left behind," Miller said in a recent statement.

Boehner eludes easy definition because "there are three John Boehner's," said Mickey Edwards, a former Republican congressman from Oklahoma who oversees a program on leadership at the non-partisan Aspen Institute.

"The first John Boehner is the one who came in as a freshman and aligned himself with Newt Gingrich and the bomb-throwers," he said. "Then, there was the John Boehner who became a much quieter leader, one who did seem much more amenable to compromise. Now, you have the third John Boehner who is seen as the vocal champion, as the leader of a party trying to win the elections."

Which Boehner is in line to become the next House speaker?

"Someone who has a clear sense of Republican principles but believes it is his job to govern," Edwards said. "He will want to go down in history as a serious-minded speaker who helped govern the country."