



Fair & Balanced

Control of the House Could Hinge on Five or Six Seats

September 8, 2010

By Chad Pergram

Five or six seats.

That could mean the difference between House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [1] (D-CA) wielding the gavel for a third-consecutive Congress next year -- or whether Republicans seize the House and send now-Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) to the rostrum instead.

However, the five or six seats that could determine Pelosi's future might not belong to Democrats who lose in November. But Democrats who win.

That's right. A handful of moderate, so-called "Blue Dog" House Democrats who withstand the 2010 bloodletting could hold the political futures of Pelosi and Boehner in their hands. In fact, they could even determine which party controls the House for the 112th Congress.

Political handicappers forecast a Republican avalanche this fall. But do Republicans win the House outright? Do Democrats hang on by a hair? Or are Republicans peeking too early and expecting too much with halcyon visions of a 50 seat gain?

One possible scenario is that no one knows who controls the House the morning after the election. Dozens of House races are expected to be nail biters. And with appeals and recounts coupled with absentee and provisional ballots, it's possible that many of those contests might not be decided for days or even weeks after the election.

Which who controls the House swings in the balance.

Here are two, complex, electoral scenarios that could impact not only Pelosi and Boehner but could also affect House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and House Minority Whip Eric Cantor (R-VA).

Scenario #1: Democrats hold the House. But by a hair.

Democrats are expecting to lose lots of seats. So if the Democrats hold the House, they breathe a sigh of relief and scoff at how they bucked the doomsday, conventional wisdom. Meantime, Republicans are on their heels. Some accuse them of early drape

measuring. Especially since Republican expectations are so high right now that anything short of claiming the majority is a defeat.

"Boehner's gone," offered one hardened GOP operative if this scenario comes to pass. The thought is that Boehner will have presided over three electoral losses for the Republicans. However, many on the right give Boehner a pass for 2006 since he inherited the residue of former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) in midstream. Still, Boehner's rank-and-file will want blood. It's then possible that Eric Cantor could then challenge Boehner in a leadership contest. Or, Boehner could see the writing on the wall and step aside to make way for Cantor or even House GOP Conference Chairman Mike Pence (R-IN).

Republican insiders tell me that it's unlikely Boehner would pull a "Gephardt." That's a reference to former House Majority and Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-MO). After Republicans dispatched Democrats from the majority in 1994, Gephardt became Minority Leader after six years of service as Majority Leader. For four consecutive elections, Democrats stuck by Gephardt as leader as the party inched closer to reclaiming the House, but never did.

However, even if Democrats do hold the House by a few seats, there's a chance that Boehner and Republicans could still seize power.

Republicans are making the vote for House Speaker an issue. Democrats and Republicans vote behind closed doors in the fall as to who they want for speaker when the House convenes in early January. Once all members are sworn-in, the House's first order of business is to pick a speaker. During the process, a House reading clerk calls the names of all 435 members in alphabetical order. For instance last time, all Democrats voted for Pelosi and all Republicans chose Boehner. But because Democrats had a clear majority in the House, Pelosi won.

Rep. Bobby Bright (D-AL) is a conservative, freshman Democrat from what had been a Republican district. However, he declared months ago he wouldn't vote for Pelosi again. Despite Bright's efforts to distance himself from the speaker, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) still managed to link Bright to Pelosi in radio ads. The spots say that Bright "is voting with Pelosi" and "isn't voting with us."

Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD) is another Blue Dog locked in a pivotal re-election fight. Herseth Sandlin often clashed with leadership and openly criticized Democratic tactics on health care reform. During a debate with Republican nominee Kristi Noem, a questioner asked Herseth Sandlin if she would vote for Pelosi again. In fact, when the woman posing the question utters Pelosi's name, the forum erupts in catcalls and jeers.

Herseth Sandlin didn't answer directly. Instead she accused both Pelosi and Boehner of promoting "agendas that at times are very challenging to South Dakota and our

economy." During another event earlier this year, Herseth Sandlin fell silent for a full ten seconds and struggled to describe her relationship with Pelosi.

"I think she would respect my decision-making process and she probably acknowledges I have some disappointment on how this process has developed," Herseth Sandlin finally stammered.

Rep. Tom Perriello (D-VA) won election to the House by the slimmest margin of any Democrat last cycle. At one public meeting, a woman asked Perriello if he would vote for Pelosi again as speaker. The Congressman didn't exactly endorse Pelosi.

"If John Boehner is the alternative, then that's what I'm left with," Perriello said. Rep. Walt Minnick (D-ID) represents the most-Republican district in the country now held by a Democrat. Minnick tinkered with voting "present" when his name was called during the vote for speaker last year. So far, Minnick refuses to say how he might lean next year.

Another lawmaker who has a history of voting against the official party flag bearer in leadership elections is Rep. Gene Taylor (D-MS).

Democrats first placed Pelosi's name in nomination for speaker against sitting house Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) when Republicans still controlled the House in 2003 and 2005. Still, Taylor cast protest votes both times, instead backing the late-Rep. Jack Murtha (D-PA).

Taylor remains circumspect about how he could vote in January.

"It's going to be interesting next go round," Taylor said, indicating he voted for Murtha because he was a "pro-defense Democrat."

However, when Democrats won the House and voted for speaker in January, 2007, Taylor did vote for Pelosi. As soon as Taylor announced his choice, his fellow Democrats showered him with applause and backslaps. Meantime, Republicans heckled Taylor with a Bronx cheer.

Rep. Heath Shuler (D-NC) is another conservative Democrat who has crossed the House braintrust. Interestingly, Shuler appeared to be joking recently when he suggested he might even run for speaker.

However, if only a few votes separate the parties, a Shuler candidacy for House Speaker (or someone similar who appeals to both parties) might not be that far-fetched. If Democrats hold the House by virtue of some of these conservative Democrats pulling through, they could be loathe to vote again for Pelosi. Particularly since these same lawmakers spent all fall trying to distance themselves from the San Francisco Democrat.

"It puts them in a difficult position," says American Enterprise Institute Congressional scholar Norm Ornstein. "You can imagine Republicans, if they're four or five votes short, picking a moderate or a conservative Democrat and trying to lure them over. When you get to a handful of votes, crazy things can happen."

A top Democratic leadership source conceded this was something he frets about. "They could go off the reservation and muck this up six ways to Sunday," he said. However, another senior House Democratic leadership aide with ties to the speaker dismisses any scenario where conservative Democrats in the House vote against Pelosi or jump ship.

"If Democrats win the House, Democrats will vote for a Democrat for speaker," said the aide.

Another leading Democratic aide who wished not to be identified argued that it's not that big a deal for conservative Democrats to vote for Pelosi.

"Every one of the conservatives already have a vote for Pelosi under her belt," the aide said. "The speaker will be fine."

But Ornstein says things will be different this time.

"They'll have to explain why they voted for the liberal Pelosi," Ornstein said. "We'll have to see how big their eyes get if they're offered something from the GOP."

At least one senior Republican House strategist thought that such a plot could be in the works.

"If it hinges on a few votes, it wouldn't surprise me to see some serious courting," the Republican said.

Meantime, one of the senior Democratic leadership aides asserted that Republicans can't get too fancy trying to coax disgruntled Democrats to switch parties or support Boehner for speaker.

"A secret deal puts the minority into the majority? That's how we would play it," said the Democratic staffer.

Ron Bonjean ran Dennis Hastert's press shop when Democrats won the House in November, 2006.

Bonjean points out that Democrats who lose this year will be moderates from swing districts. Liberals from solid Democratic turf will survive. Thus, Pelosi will have more liberal allies on her side they could close ranks around her. However, Bonjean says conservative Democrats who do win re-election may want to stick it to Pelosi for her agenda.

"This could be the payback vote," Bonjean said. "This could be the protest vote for all the tough votes they had to take for her."

Scenario #2: Democrats lose the House outright. Who's the top Democrat?

As much as Scenario #1 was chock with palace intrigue, Scenario #2 could prove to be even more delicious for political observers.

Say Republicans win a clear majority. It's obvious Boehner is poised to succeed Pelosi as speaker. But what happens to Pelosi? Does she revert to Minority Leader? Would the House Democratic Caucus even have her back?

Moreover, what would Pelosi want to do? After all, she'll turn 71 next year. She's become the first female Speaker of the House and passed health care reform. And she's got eight grandkids.

Peace out.

"Democrats aren't going to lose the House, so it's not even a consideration," said a source close to Pelosi. "It's something we haven't assessed or considered."

First of all, it's rare for a sitting House Speaker to accept demotion to Minority Leader. For instance, after the GOP lost the House in 2006, Dennis Hastert said he would not run for a leadership post in the new Congress but would remain in office.

"That was set up so he could leave with dignity," said Ron Bonjean of Hastert's exit strategy after the GOP's 2006 debacle. "It was obvious it was time for another leader to step up and lead the show."

In fact, the House Historian's Office says the last two speakers who then became Minority Leader were former Speakers Sam Rayburn (D-TX) and Joe Martin (R-MA) in the 1940s and 50s. The House toggled back and forth between Democratic and Republican control several times then. On each occasion, either Rayburn or Martin yielded the speaker's gavel and became the House Minority Leader.

There are some who believe Pelosi would stay and fight even if Democrats lost the majority. Again, due to electoral attrition of Democratic moderates, the House Democratic Caucus will be more liberal in the next Congress. So, Pelosi could have no problem wrangling the votes if she wants to stick around as Minority Leader.

But that could cause a conflict with House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD). Hoyer and Pelosi have maintained a rivalry since they both interned in the early 1960s for the late-Sen. Daniel Brewster (D-MD). Friction between the two intensified when Pelosi backed Jack Murtha to be Majority Leader instead Hoyer in 2006. But Hoyer emerged victorious in the closed-door tally.

Aides to both contend there is no bad blood between the two.

Still, would Hoyer accept a demotion to whip? And would Democrats use the Hastert model to put Pelosi out to pasture in favor of Hoyer? What if Pelosi and Hoyer ran against one other for the top Democratic post? Some would portray that as the culmination of a feud that's simmered for half a century.

"Pelosi is a fighter," said Ornstein. "This is her existence. It's hard for me to imagine her leaving."

"I don't think she's going to want to get bogged down in a leadership race against Steny Hoyer," countered a Democratic aide.

"People are going to want to know (from her) why she didn't win," said another senior Democratic aide. "She'll know (if she has the votes). She's a good vote counter."

But an aide who wished to remain anonymous doubted that Pelosi would even want to stay in the game.

"She's beyond being a minority leader of Congress. She has global name recognition. She has stature," he said. "It's like been, there done that. Now it's time for somebody else."

Regardless, Democrats will still control the White House [2]. Ron Bonjean says under this scenario, President Obama will apply significant pressure on Congressional Democrats as to whom he wants to carry the party flag on Capitol Hill [3]. Bonjean says Steny Hoyer is well-respected on both sides of the aisle and suggests Mr. Obama will need a bipartisan figure to lead House Democrats as he heads for re-election in 2012. "Steny Hoyer is a more affable, genteel, dealmaker," Bonjean said of Hoyer's relationship with a potential Republican majority.

Moreover, some argue that Pelosi may want to leave Congress to assume the role of elder stateswoman for the party. She could travel the world and work on issues close to her heart like the environment and human rights.

Still, many Democrats consulted for this story didn't even want to consider the variety of outcomes suggested here.

"You can't fight this fight if you think you're losing," said one senior Democrat.

"Call back November third," said another.