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Midterm fury might leave Pelosi safe

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Even if Democrats drop by the dozens in the midterm elections, Speaker Nancy Pelosi's hold on power will be as safe as ever if Democrats retain a thin majority in the House.

In a smaller majority, Pelosi will be even more surrounded by loyalists, because most of the losers on the Democratic side of the ballot would likely be moderates and conservatives who have been the least reliable Pelosi supporters.

In interviews with more than two dozen Democratic lawmakers, none suggested Pelosi should be replaced, and nobody predicted a serious challenge to Pelosi's authority, provided Democrats hold onto power.

Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland and Majority Whip Jim Clyburn of South Carolina also would keep their leadership titles in a Democratic majority, lawmakers said, though there might be contests for some junior leadership posts.

Republicans who have demonized Pelosi may actually be cementing her hold on power within the Democratic Caucus. With GOP leaders openly predicting that Republicans will seize control of the House, any failure to do so will be portrayed by Democrats as a triumph for Pelosi and solidify her reputation as a survivor in a tough political environment.

"The bar is taking over the House. They've been clear about it," Rep. Michael Capuano (D-Mass.) said of his Republican counterparts. "So if they don't take over the House, I think it's a big win."

Pelosi loyalists will draw even closer to her within a smaller majority.

"I think that win, lose or draw in November, Nancy's stock has gone up because of the way she has pulled us together and gotten tough stuff done that we're going to be campaigning on," said Rep. Anthony Weiner of New York. "Pelosi was acting on the will of the caucus and has done a pretty remarkable job."

Pelosi has history on her side as well, because efforts to oust sitting speakers are rare in House history.

Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) stepped down after a dismal performance by his party in the 1998 midterm elections, but he had already seen his support dwindle within the GOP

Conference, including an attempted “coup” the previous year. Jim Wright (D-Texas) left the speakership in June 1989 under an ethical cloud. Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.) lost his seat and the majority in 1994, while Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) left office after the Democratic victory in the 2006 elections.

The House historian’s office could find no other case since the start of the 20th century in which the majority party had held onto power but replaced a sitting speaker.

Pelosi won’t talk publicly about her plans for next year; indeed, she won’t indulge any discussion, either in public or private, that assumes a Republican takeover after the midterms.

“I think all assumptions are false when it comes to politics. I really do,” Pelosi told reporters last week. “They’re all stale, and every race has to be judged as to what it brings to it. Do you have to take into consideration an overarching mood? Certainly. But we win our races one district at a time.”

Several of Pelosi’s allies argue that her power would actually be enhanced if she has a smaller majority, because she won’t have to cater to as many Blue Dog moderates.

“Some of the people who will lose are probably some of the people who are hardest for us to get when we need them to line up with the Democrats,” said Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.).

But, while her power within the Democratic Caucus could only grow in a smaller majority, Pelosi would face a much bigger challenge to move a substantive Democratic agenda.

She struggled to get moderate and conservative Democrats on board for health care reform and cap-and-trade legislation, and it would be much harder — if not impossible — to pick up that support from newly elected Republican lawmakers. Pelosi would also have no margin for error on tough votes, and she wouldn’t be able to cut nervous lawmakers loose to vote against Democratic bills.

“I am a supporter of the speaker. I think she’s done an extraordinary job,” said Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), who also backs Hoyer and Clyburn. “My thinking is that I don’t expect any successful challenges [to her leadership]. I do expect there to be significant concerns about the narrowing of the majority and what it means to some of the institutional ways the Democratic Caucus functions.”

Pelosi might also have to deal with a new political dynamic with the White House. President Barack Obama will be more focused on his reelection, and his relationship with Congress will be driven by 2012 politics, meaning Pelosi’s priorities could be sidetracked.

Some Democrats are also unhappy that Pelosi hasn’t pushed back harder against the

White House for outright or implied criticism of her stewardship of the House during the health care fight and other legislative contests. Those tensions will remain after the midterms.

“Who do you know that could stand up to the pummeling she gets [from Republicans] and a lot of the disses that she gets — intentional or unintentional — she receives from our own administration?” asked Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson of Connecticut.

Internal Democratic projections show the party losing 25 to 30 seats, in line with traditional losses for the midterm elections during a new presidency but short of the 40-seat gain Republicans need to propel Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio into the speaker’s chair. Political prognosticator Charlie Cook now says there are 63 Democratic seats in play, versus only five GOP seats.

“We will keep the House,” said Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman Chris Van Hollen of Maryland. “Speaker Pelosi has displayed remarkable leadership on a difficult legislative agenda. ... There are clear signs that things are improving.”

“The House is in play, there’s no question about that. But I think we keep the majority,” a top Democratic strategist said.

But the recent retirement of longtime Rep. Dave Obey of Wisconsin and the defeat of 14-term incumbent Rep. Alan Mollohan of West Virginia also play into Democratic angst.

The conservative Democrats who do stick around may grumble but don’t seem poised to make an issue of Pelosi’s speakership.

Rep. Gene Taylor of Mississippi, a conservative Democrat, stopped short of saying there would be an outright challenge to Pelosi or other members of the elected leadership if Democrats are still in charge after Election Day, though he did signal his unhappiness with some of their decisions.

“We all have to earn our jobs every day, no matter what that job is,” Taylor said, declining to go further.