

Roll Call

Democrats Consider Life in the Minority

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It's the nightmare scenario House Democrats don't want to talk about: a potential leadership bloodbath if they lose the majority.

The minority offers one fewer leadership slot, which would make for a messy post-election scenario in which Democrats already would be reeling from defeat. Unless Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) or another leader falls on his or her sword, a high-profile leadership fight would be all but guaranteed.

Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-S.C.) has shown no inclination that he would be willing to give up the Whip job, which would leave Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) the odd man out. Hoyer could go after the leader job in a long-shot bid against Pelosi in a reprise of their epic 2002 face-off for Minority Whip, although one Hoyer ally said there was not even a remote chance he would do so.

Still, he'd have a powerful argument to make — that the party's rejection at the polls suggests they need a more moderate approach. But more likely, Hoyer could take on Clyburn for Minority Whip instead, setting up a major Caucus battle between fiscally conservative Blue Dogs, the Congressional Black Caucus and everyone in between. Neither prospect is particularly appealing.

Amid the kerfuffle last week over White House spokesman Robert Gibbs' statement that Republicans could take back the House, Clyburn told MSNBC that losing the majority was "highly improbable." But asked by Roll Call whether he would want to keep his leadership post if the improbable happened, Clyburn hedged.

"The whip seat belongs to the Caucus," he said. "They do with it what they want to with it."

Clyburn, however, quickly begged off the line of questioning. "I'm not answering any hypotheticals."

Hoyer, likewise, said in an interview that he expects to be Majority Leader next year and hasn't given any thought to a return to the minority. "I'm not considering that alternative," the No. 2 Democrat said.

Pelosi has given no hints about what she would do. "We expect to be in the majority and she expects to be Speaker," a Pelosi ally said.

All three leaders appear to be making every effort to ensure that their positions in leadership are secure: They have all been active raising money and traveling to numerous districts. Hoyer, meanwhile, has given a series of high-profile speeches staking out a moderate vision on economic and security policy, and he is a sought-after speaker in moderate districts where Pelosi is viewed as more of a liability.

Democratic Members, aides and party strategists willing to discuss the prospects of a Democratic minority offered a range of opinions of what might happen. Several liberal Members said Pelosi would still have the edge in any possible fight with Hoyer, because the bulk of any 2010 losses would presumably be Hoyer's moderate allies, who often populate swing districts.

If Hoyer is to enter any leadership race after November, one Democratic strategist predicted it would be against Pelosi rather than Clyburn. This Democrat opined that Hoyer would probably think he had a claim on the Minority Leader job given his current post as Majority Leader: "Hoyer would probably compete with her, that's my assumption."

Most liberals believe that even if the House changes hands, Pelosi would stick around with the belief that she could regain the gavel with President Barack Obama on the ballot in 2012.

But even that isn't a certainty.

Former Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) quickly faded into the sunset after the Democrats took the House in 2006, and there are people in Hoyer's camp and elsewhere who expect Pelosi would quit as well.

One K Street Democrat predicted that, one way or another, Pelosi would not lead the Democrats in the minority.

"Speakers of parties who lose their majorities don't normally continue on in the leadership position, usually by choice. It's one of those things that people normally understand and realize," this Democrat said.

There is precedent, however, for Pelosi to stay on. In the 1940s and 1950s, Democrat Sam Rayburn and Republican Joseph Martin repeatedly swapped back and forth between Speaker and Minority Leader as control of the House bounced between the two parties, according to the Office of the House Historian.

The Democratic lobbyist said, however, that it would be "tough to say" who would win a Whip race between Hoyer and Clyburn if Pelosi stayed atop the Democratic ranks and Hoyer didn't challenge her.

"I know that Mr. Clyburn wants to serve as Whip whether we're in the majority or the minority, and my guess is he would seek to pursue that," the lobbyist said.

Hoyer allies, meanwhile, plan to make sure the Maryland Democrat can glide into the Minority Leader slot if Pelosi steps aside, rather than get swept up in a post-defeat purge at the top.

“The sense is that if we lose big-time, heads are going to roll,” one Democratic strategist said.

Hoyer’s backers are making the case that having someone like him — with close ties to moderates — in leadership would be especially important for Democrats hoping to win the House back.

“Barack Obama can’t have a Congress that’s running left in 2012,” the strategist said. “So the Caucus will have to take a more moderate tack regardless.”

The strategist added, “There are people who can’t stand the Speaker. There are not many people who can’t stand Steny Hoyer. If she’s not an option, I think they easily default to him.”

If Pelosi stays, there are ways to find slots and avoid a divisive Caucus fight, some suggested. Pelosi could create a new leadership post, for example, or have each leader move down a notch. Perhaps, some suggested, Pelosi could prevail upon Caucus Chairman John Larson (Conn.) to give up his slot to make way for Clyburn to return to the job he used to hold. Pelosi successfully convinced Larson to run for the job as Caucus vice chairman instead of Caucus chairman to make space in the leadership lineup for then-Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), who had just ushered Democrats into the majority in 2006 as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

A Larson ally, however, said he could even move up in leadership if anyone above him steps aside.

Of course, there is another ugly scenario short of losing the majority: What happens if House Democrats barely cling to power, say by a couple of votes? Does Pelosi look in the mirror, ponder the prospect of regularly having to beg Republicans for help to get anything done and make the decision that Hoyer would be the better person for the job? (One Democratic Member joked that would be her ultimate revenge on Hoyer.) Several Democratic Members, however, said they couldn’t envision any scenario under which she would give up the gavel.

But what if a few conservative Democrats announce that they won’t vote for her for Speaker under any circumstances, forcing her to step aside, lest John Boehner (R) be elected Speaker? That scenario has been pushed by Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) as a way to get Hoyer the top House post, using the 1998 elections that toppled then-Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) as a template. Aides to Hoyer and Pelosi have tried to squash that idea, and some other Republicans hate the proposition because they say Pelosi is easier to run against and is a better fundraising foil.

Democrats have certainly had their white-knuckle leadership fights in the past. After the 2006 elections, Pelosi backed a surprise run by the late Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) for Majority Leader against Hoyer, but Hoyer won handily. Hoyer and Pelosi quickly buried the hatchet and Hoyer has been a loyal No. 2.

If the party loses just 15 to 25 seats — as many Members hope and expect — the picture is likely a lot less turbulent.

Democrats would still have a workable majority, and leaders could argue forcefully that they weathered a tumultuous election year. The biggest question then would be whether Rep. Chris Van Hollen (Md.) would settle for continuing to serve as the Assistant to the Speaker after helming the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee for two terms, and who among a talented and ambitious crop of DCCC chairmen hopefuls would succeed him.