

Congress vote to fund in their districts that may not be particularly worthy, at least not to the national taxpayers who foot the bill. In the fourth piece, a political science professor and a statistician analyze the reasons behind remarkably uncompetitive congressional elections. The final selection is a 1950 speech made by Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, decrying the incivility and damage to personal liberty that came with the attempt by her colleague Sen. Joseph McCarthy to root out what he saw as a communist threat in American government.



61 The Pelosi Factor

Julian E. Zelizer, Politico.com

Why We Chose This Piece

Speakers of the House of the Representatives, particularly in recent years, have been lightning rods for criticism. This has been especially true of the current Speaker, Nancy Pelosi. Polls indicate that the public has been no more satisfied with a Democratic-controlled House than it was before 2006, when Republicans and Speaker Dennis Hastert were in charge. Here, Julian E. Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs, argues that although the public appears to say otherwise, Pelosi has the potential to leave a positive legacy.

The article, however, is about much more than the strengths and weaknesses of Pelosi. It illustrates nicely the complexities of being Speaker, a position that any student of Congress must understand. As you read, ask yourself what powers—both formal and informal—the Speaker has to accomplish her goals. What limitations are there on those powers?

In November 2004, the day after President George W. Bush's reelection and the padding of Republican congressional majorities, Richard Viguerie, a pioneer of the modern conservative movement, said, "Now comes the revolution. . . . If you don't implement a conservative agenda now, when do you?"

Four years later, the situation looks very different. Democrats control the White House and Congress. Pundits are talking about the crisis in the Republican Party, and Democrats are pushing forward a bold domestic agenda—including health care and the environment—that has the potential to rival the Great Society.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has been instrumental to the reversal of Democratic fortunes even though most of the attention has been focused on President Barack Obama.

With new reports that Pelosi was briefed about the CIA's use of torture in 2003, there are likely to be some Democrats who raise questions about her future as a party leader.

But before they do, they should closely consider what they would lose. Since taking over as speaker 2½ years ago, Pelosi has proved to be a formidable leader who might

Selection published: May 13, 2009

very well amass the kind of legendary record that House Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-Texas) achieved in the 1940s and '50s. It is still too early to tell, but she is off to a good start. Pelosi's speakership has relied on ideas and muscle. She comes from the progressive Democratic tradition and has not been shy about taking on Republicans or centrist Democrats. Even though Republicans immediately tried to put her on the defensive after their losses in 2006 by warning voters of the "San Francisco values" that she would bring into the House, Pelosi has not shied away from defending progressive policies. Pelosi and House Democrats directly challenged Bush's policies in Iraq and called for an immediate withdrawal.

Pelosi has also been a driving force at pushing for progressive domestic policies, including with the current administration. In her first session, House Democrats obtained an increase in the minimum wage, higher benefits for veterans and improved gas standards. Since January 2009, House Democrats have shaped much of the economic stimulus package to include funding for progressive programs such as schooling, Medicaid, infrastructure and state assistance that had been neglected in the conservative era.

Nonetheless, Pelosi is also adept at using the carrot and the stick. She took power in an age of strong speakers and lives by these rules. She has proved to be skilled at fundraising, and members of the House realize that there is a high cost to be incurred to their campaigns if they break from the party line. When a fight broke out between Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and John Dingell (D-Mich.) over who would chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the leadership stood behind the environmentally friendly Waxman.

At the same time, behind the scenes, she made sure that more progressive voices in the Democratic Party did not defect when Senate Democrats failed to obtain an immediate withdrawal from Iraq and when they were forced to agree to spending reductions in the economic stimulus bill.

The challenges for Pelosi will increase over the coming year. In some ways, the economic stimulus bill and the financial bailout were the easy part for House Democrats. Now come the two issues that have the potential to divide the party: health care reform and environmental regulation. Though there is general consensus that bold legislation is needed in both areas, the devil is in the details. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel recently issued a warning to the leadership and the White House that he would oppose a tax on employer-provided benefits.

There has also been a notable drop in poll numbers about how Americans perceive Pelosi even at a time when favorable ratings for Democrats in Congress have risen. Now the torture briefing stories will cause more problems.

But if she can emerge from these struggles with her reputation and the party relatively intact, Pelosi might very well be on her way to joining the list of some of the legendary speakers of the House. She is certainly already one of the crucial forces behind the reconstruction of the Democratic Party.

Consider the source and the audience.

- Zelizer is a well-known professor of American political history, especially regarding Congress. How might that influence his ability to evaluate the potential legacy of a sitting Speaker?