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Democrats Take Control on Hill

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New Speaker Pelosi Shepherds Ethics Bills To Passage in House

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[Rep. Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) was elected America's first female speaker of the House yesterday in a raucous, bipartisan celebration of a historic breakthrough, and hours later she presided over passage of the broadest ethics and lobbying revision since the Watergate era.

Democrats took control of the House and Senate after 12 years of nearly unbroken Republican rule, with resolute calls for bipartisan comity and a pledge to move quickly on an agenda of health-care, homeland security, education and energy proposals. [Sen. Harry M. Reid](#) (D-Nev.), the soft-spoken son of a hard-rock miner, took the helm of the Senate, after a closed-door session in the Capitol's stately Old Senate Chamber. But with the eyes of history riveted on her, it was Pelosi's day.

"This is an historic moment, for Congress, and for the women of this country. It is a moment for which we have waited more than 200 years," Pelosi proclaimed, to a roaring ovation in the packed House chamber. "For our daughters and granddaughters, today we have broken the marble ceiling. To our daughters and our granddaughters, the sky is the limit."

For Pelosi, yesterday's election was not only the culmination of a long climb by women through the ranks of Congress but also the personal triumph of a hard-nosed partisan, a grandmother of six who methodically plotted the Democrats' return to power after more than a decade in the minority. A House floor where Democrats had been marginalized to the point of irrelevance in recent years was alive with handshakes, smiles, hugs and boisterous children on the Democratic side of the aisle. Republicans, once so confident in what many saw as a permanent majority, sat glumly watching the festivities.

As Pelosi entered the chamber before her formal, party-line election, the House erupted in bipartisan applause. Only [Rep. Joe L. Barton](#) (R-Tex.), the outgoing chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, remained seated in stony silence. Pelosi's predecessor as speaker, [Rep. J. Dennis Hastert](#) (R-Ill.), sat quietly and unobtrusively in the rear of the chamber, except for one brief moment of recognition.

When House Minority Leader [John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) rose to present the gavel to the new speaker, he was magnanimous in acknowledging both the roots of Republican defeat last November and the historic import of the moment.

"In a few moments, I'll have the high privilege of handing the gavel of the House of Representatives to a woman for the first time in American history," he told his fellow lawmakers. "Whether you're a Republican, a Democrat or an independent, this is a cause for celebration."

He concluded with a warning for Democrats, gleaned from his party's pursuit of power and the lessons learned from defeat: "If there is one lesson that stands out from our party's time in the majority, it is this: A congressional majority is simply a means to an end. The value of a majority lies not in the chance to wield great power but in the chance to do great things."

In what must be another first, the gavel changed hands with a hug and a kiss.

In the Senate chamber, members lined up in groups of four to take their oaths with Vice President

Cheney. Former senators, including Democrats John Breaux (La.), Charles S. Robb (Va.) and Jean Carnahan (Mo.), circulated on the floor to offer congratulations. Outgoing Majority Leader [Bill Frist](#) (R-Tenn.), now retired from the Senate, joked with [Sen. Barack Obama](#) (Ill.) as the Democratic presidential prospect worked his way through the crowd. Family members crowded the surrounding corridors, including former president Bill Clinton. Democratic [Sen. Robert C. Byrd](#) (W.Va.) shouted "Praise Jesus!" during the opening prayer.

The Senate will plunge into its own ethics and lobbying overhaul package next week, then take up legislation to boost the federal minimum wage for the first time in a decade. But it was clear yesterday that the Senate would have no choice but to take a more deliberative approach to the issues the House plans to bulldoze through. Senate leaders pledged bipartisanship, and in a chamber divided 51 to 49, they will have no choice.

"Now, I know that you're not accustomed, members of the press, to people getting along, working together," Reid told reporters after the closed-door Senate meeting in the morning. "But Senator McConnell and I believe this is a new day in Washington."

Reid nodded to his GOP counterpart, [Sen. Mitch McConnell](#) (Ky.). "I think Harry's got it right," McConnell said.

The Senate margin is even more tenuous because [Sen. Tim Johnson](#) (D-S.D.) is sidelined after emergency brain surgery.

Republican leaders decided not to seek special language spelling out the terms of a transition in case of a power shift -- say, if Johnson vacates his post and his state's GOP governor appoints a Republican to replace him. Under that scenario, power would effectively shift to Republicans, because Cheney would provide the tiebreaking 51st vote. But for Republicans to take parliamentary control, the Senate would have to vote for new organizational rules, a move Democrats could filibuster.

A similar scenario unfolded in January 2001, when a 50-50 Senate convened. In 2001, Democrats demanded a "kick-out clause" in organizing negotiations that would automatically scrap agreements on committee ratios and funding levels and force new organizational rules. But Republicans decided this month against a confrontation that would come from demanding a similar clause.

"Nobody over here talked about that at all," said Don Stewart, spokesman for McConnell.

In the House, Democrats did not skip a beat between formally taking control and getting to work on what they have called their hundred-hours agenda. Last night, the House nearly unanimously approved a broad package of internal rules changes designed to sever the cozy links that have developed between lawmakers and lobbyists.

The changes would prohibit House members or employees from knowingly accepting gifts or travel from a registered lobbyist, foreign agent or lobbyist's client. Lawmakers could no longer fly on corporate jets. In addition, congressional travel financed by outside groups would have to be approved in advance by the House ethics committee and immediately disclosed to the public.

The measures were approved 430 to 1, with only Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) voting against it. This was a remarkable change considering that House Republicans could barely pass a far weaker measure last May and ultimately did not enact any measure because they could not reach agreement with the Senate. But voters in November identified corruption as one of their primary concerns, and the House responded yesterday.

"It's amazing what an election will do," said Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.).

Today, Democrats hope to pass new rules to promote open deliberations in the House, rein in

special-interest spending and lawmaker pet projects, and prohibit passage of spending or tax measures that increase the federal deficit.

Over the next two weeks, Democrats in the House plan to enact new homeland security measures, increase the minimum wage, allow federally funded stem cell research, permit the federal government to negotiate lower prescription-drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries, cut student-loan interest rates and fund alternative-energy research by rolling back tax breaks for oil companies.

But Pelosi herself acknowledged that her carefully constructed consensus agenda will not satisfy the angry electorate that swept the Democrats to power. Democrats will have to confront President Bush on the larger, more controversial issues of the day: the war in Iraq, military tribunals that suspend the legal rights of terrorism suspects, and warrantless wiretapping by the National Security Agency.

Her call yesterday for a new direction in Iraq "that allows us to responsibly redeploy American forces" elicited strong applause in her party while clearly splitting Republicans, many of whom joined the ovation.

Reid also saw Iraq as the issue of the day and a possible impediment to Democratic plans.

"Iraq is where it is," Reid said. He added: "We're not going to divert our attention from what needs to be accomplished for this country. There are a lot of things that need to be accomplished. And we're going to work on those, in spite of Iraq."

To make it clear that such issues will have to be addressed, [Reps. Adam Schiff](#) (D-Calif.) and [Jeff Flake](#) (R-Ariz.) reintroduced legislation on the new Congress's first day to mandate that NSA surveillance once again involve a warrant from a secret federal court.

"There's a long list where Congress has been abdicating their responsibility, and I suspect the leadership and the chairs will have to quickly get to work," Schiff said.

Democrats are already having trouble reconciling their promises even for the initial hundred-hour blitz. Senior House Democratic aides said a promise to cut student-loan interest rates in half will have to be phased in over five years to comply with a pledge to offset any additional deficit spending with equal spending cuts or tax hikes.

The loan pledge is proving just too expensive, and Senate Finance Committee Chairman [Max Baucus](#) (D-Mont.) and the committee's senior Republican, [Charles E. Grassley](#) (Iowa) introduced legislation yesterday to immediately repeal the alternative minimum tax. That proposal would cost the Treasury hundreds of billions of dollars.

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