

Will new Congress be boon for Blacks?

By Frank Armand Albano
Sentinel-Voice

With the Democrats in control of both the House and Senate, the 2006 elections have propelled a number of African-American congressional leaders into committee chairs.

Many Black Nevadans are hopeful that their voices will be heard in a Democratic-led Congress that almost all but disappeared since the 1994 GOP sweep of the congressional mid-term elections.

That year, the Democrats lost control of both the House and Senate for the first time in 40 years.

According to Capitol Hill pundits, it's premature to know what the new Congress will bring and what the Congressional Black Caucus agenda will be. The CBC will likely gain about 15 subcommittee chairs and lead several major committees.

In the Congress led by GOP whip Newt Gingrich 12 years ago, in what has come to be called, "The Contract with America" by conservatives, and since then, the Congressional Black Caucus voice is often muted, by a right-wing Republican majority in both Houses of Congress, a Republican Chief Executive and a Supreme

Court dominated by conservative justices.

African-American voters came out in significant numbers across the country and helped tip the balance of power in favor of the Democrats.

Many Blacks nationwide wonder if the GOP status quo that crippled Black leaders in Congress for a dozen years is about to change.

The Democrats swept the House by 235 seats, and hold a razor-thin control of the Senate by 51 to 49 in January 2007.

One of the beneficiaries, the CBC, is going to be in a

position to make good on some promises to move issues important to Black America to the forefront.

A spokeswoman for the National Democratic Party insisted that "by the Democrats takeover of Congress, all Americans will benefit."

Many will benefit from changes in education, healthcare, Social Security, lower taxes on the middle class, winding down the Iraq war and jobs. The Democrats will hold hearings, introduce legislation and investigate how and why the Bush Administration got this nation into war, many voters hope.

One of those, who campaigned for candidates and asked African-Americans to see a glowing picture of possibilities, is Democratic Representative John Lewis from Georgia.

Lewis visited Las Vegas in his travels recently. He stumped the campaign trail throughout Southern Nevada to drum up support in the weeks before the elections to get out the Black vote for Democratic candidates. Lewis is now poised to be appointed to an influential chair of the the Subcommittee on Ways and Means and Oversight.

As such, Lewis will be one of the most powerful Black leaders in Congress. And many voters will be looking to see what he will do to benefit Nevada and African-Americans who helped get the victory.

Lewis, an original member of the 1960s civil rights fight, along with Martin Luther King Jr., made it clear when he said, "This is the most important election, and we must take back our country." Lewis is a strong civil rights advocate.

It is a little too early to know exactly what the new chairs will bring to the table.

Pelosi eyes D.C. voting abilities

By Stephen K. Cooper
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Incoming U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has pledged her support for granting limited voting rights to Washington, D.C., Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton.

Pelosi, a California Democrat who represents portions of San Francisco, said House Democrats plan to change the House rules to allow Norton a limited vote on the House floor in the Committee of the Whole House starting next year.

That would give District residents voting representation in Congress for the first time since 1995, when Republican lawmakers won a majority of House seats and stripped the vote from the nation's capital.

In the Nov. 7 elections, Democrats picked up 29 seats in the House and six seats in the Senate, giving them control of Congress and the ability to set the legislative agenda and change the rules.

The White House is also considering the issue of voting rights for D.C. residents.

In response to questioning by reporters on Nov. 8, President Bush said he would review the District of Columbia Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act of 2006, a bipartisan bill that passed the House Government Reform Committee in May by a vote of 29-4.

Bush said he didn't know much about the bill or know whether it would pass Congress during the lame-duck session, which will last through mid-December.

The measure was offered by Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-Va.), and co-sponsored by Norton and Pelosi. It would grant full voting rights to Norton in exchange for adding an additional Congressional seat to the state of Utah.

The bill would require the newly elected Utah state legislature to approve the new Congressional seat, but so far, state lawmakers have not taken action. As a result, the D.C. voting bill is in limbo.

"There is something fundamentally wrong with placing 600,000 taxpaying Americans on the sidelines of democracy, and it's gratifying to know that President Bush is looking at legislation that would correct this injustice," said Ilir Zherka, executive director of DC Vote.

DC Vote is a nonprofit educational and advocacy organization dedicated to securing full voting representation in Congress for D.C. residents.

Jennifer Crider, a spokesperson for Pelosi, said the House will change the rules to grant Norton the limited voting rights on the House floor. The next step would be to pass the Davis bill, although the fate of the measure is not certain yet, she said.

Stephen K. Cooper writes for Afro Newspapers.

Democrats cautious on plan

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

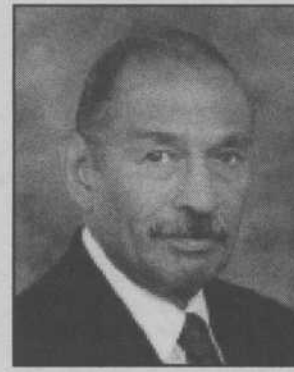
WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Over the years, Rep. John Conyers has championed an assortment of cutting-edge issues, such as reparations, the elimination of mandatory minimum federal sentences and ending disparate treatment of crack cocaine users. When he takes over next month as chair of the House Judiciary Committee, all of those issues will have to take back seat to another cause — election reform.

"In every recent election, there have been well-substantiated allegations of attempts to discourage or prevent eligible voters from voting. There is also a widespread consensus that electronic voting machines are woefully insecure and subject to tampering and manipulation," states Conyers, the senior member of the House Judiciary Committee.

With African-Americans set to key committee chairs in the House, expectations are high. But interviews with those new powerbrokers seem to indicate while they have not abandoned their liberal leanings, some plan to proceed with safer issues, such as voting reform.

But to some, voting reform is a cutting-edge issue, especially the right to have votes by African-Americans cast and counted.

"For our democracy to survive, we must ensure that every eligible voter is allowed to vote and their vote is counted correctly," Conyers explained in a written statement. "I look forward to working with the Democratic Caucus and the members of the committee — both Democratic and Republican — in developing an



"For our democracy to survive, we must ensure that every eligible voter is allowed to vote and their vote is counted correctly."

— Rep. John Conyers
House Judiciary Committee

agenda and oversight plan that serves the interest of the American people... One of my highest priorities will be election reform."

The Judiciary Committee has oversight of the courts, crime, portions of homeland security, and constitutional issues, which includes voting. The committee's hallmark legislation in the 109th Congress was the successful renewal of the Voting Rights Act with bipartisan support.

Members of Conyers' staff says the normally outspoken congressman is withholding public comment on other specific plans under his leadership until after Dec. 4, the day committee assignments will be made official.

But Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), slated to become chair of the Financial Services Committee's Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity, speaks freely about her hopes for the future.

Also a member of the Judiciary, she agrees that election reform must be a priority, particularly establishing a standard for voting machines so that they are required to have a paper trail and eliminating state-only voter identification requirements. But she lists a string of other issues that she will be pushing, including over-

turning of some legislation pushed through by the Bush Administration in its so-called war on terror.

"He has undermined the privacy of Americans with Patriot Act I and Patriot Act II," said Waters, founder and chair of the 73-member Out of Iraq Congressional Caucus. She also wants to revisit bankruptcy reform. People filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy used to be able to get off virtually free of legal obligations to pay debts, allowing them to get off to a fresh start. However, Bush pushed through legislation that required bankruptcy filers to enter a forced repayment plan and gave lenders and businesses new legal means to recover debts.

"We have to see about overturning some of that stuff and making sure that they fall under the constitution's guarantee for privacy. We ought to take that bankruptcy bill back up. It was a bad bill," Waters said.

Waters also wants to establish legislation that will curtail the spread of predatory lending through payday lenders. But she concedes some legislation will be difficult to pass or overturn.

"We can't go in thinking it's going to be a cake walk. Some of it will get done," said Waters. "But we're go-

ing to have problems. We've got diversity right in our own caucus."

Waters was referring to the Blue Dog Democrats, 37 moderate to conservative members who often vote with Republicans.

Rep. Charlie Rangel, who will become chair of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, which deals with a wide range of financial issues such as the minimum wage, taxes, social security affordable health care and housing, said liberal Democrats may need to curtail their message in order to build broader support.

Rangel ticks off a list of issues for which the Democratic majority should fight.

"I don't see that there's an inconsistency with Democrats and the issues that African-Americans face," he said. "So, how do you compromise in ending a war that so many of your people are being harmed and invited to join because of economic reasons? How many kids are out of school and on the streets without training, without an education? How many are in the criminal justice system because they didn't have alternatives? How many public schools are failing? What is the need for affordable housing? Can we not improve to make certain that no one falls between the cracks of having access to health insurance? Those are principles that the party believes in and that minorities have to believe in. So, I don't see the possibility of compromising those principles. We just can't do it."

Conyers, Rangel and two other CBC members are slated to rise to chairs. Waters and 14 others to subcommittee. (See Democrats, Page 11)