An Early Look at the Pelosi Speakership

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The post-reform era of the U.S. House of Representatives began in 1975, halfway through a 40-year period of Democratic control. The liberal majority, frustrated by the dominance of southern committee chairs, shifted power in the chamber to the party leaders. In exchange, they demanded a series of rules changes that also empowered the caucus, enabling the rank and file to participate in the development and implementation of party strategy.

When Republicans took over control of the House after the 1994 elections, they adopted a new style of party governance. Like their predecessors, Republicans gave authority to their Speaker, Newt Gingrich, but they abandoned the Democrats consensual style of party governance. Instead, they re-empowered committee chairs, but forced them to seek caucus support in frequent, competitive elections. This governing style remained in place when Dennis Hastert replaced Gingrich as Speaker.

The return to power of the Democrats in 2007 raised some interesting questions. This time, Democrats would be developing a party leadership structure upon ascending to power rather than in the middle of an extended reign. Would Speaker Nancy Pelosi bring back the consensual style that had been the hallmark of previous Democratic regimes? Or would she mimic the Republicans' approach of centralizing power in the hands of those who had triumphed in highly competitive, and frequent, leadership contests?

This paper examines the first three years of the Pelosi speakership in search of preliminary answers to these questions. It begins with a review of Pelosi's political biography to discover her personal political style. We then examine the mood of the caucus since 2007 to establish the type of leadership style that the party desires. We then examine the leadership structure put in place in 2007 to see whether it more resembles the previous Democratic model or the existing Republican approach. Finally, we explore Pelosi's floor strategy under both divided and unified government. Together, this should give us an initial snapshot of how party governance is being achieved in the Pelosi speakership.

The Politics of Nancy Pelosi

Nancy Pelosi, born in 1940, is the daughter of Thomas D'Alesandro, a congressman and three-term mayor of Baltimore and the head of an old-fashioned political machine. Biographies of Pelosi point to this formative experience as having educated her in the ways of politics. (See, for example, Bzdek 2008, and Sandalow 2007.) Throughout her youth, Pelosi watched as her father conducted party business from their residence. The house was often full of constituents seeking help from the Mayor who dispensed favors in exchange for party loyalty. Ideologically, her father was a New Deal Democrat, supporting job creation through public works at home and anti-communism abroad.

In 1969, at the age of 29, Pelosi moved to San Francisco. In that era, San Francisco was the heart of New Left politics. That movement challenged the political and social conventions of the day, embracing public policies well to the left of the

prevailing political spectrum.[1] To this day, the phrase "San Francisco liberal" is seen as a moniker for the left wing of the Democratic Party.

Pelosi's voting record as a U.S. Representative from San Francisco reflects her embrace of that city's political ideology. Her DW-NOMINATE scores in her early years in Congress plant her firmly in the left wing of her party. In her first term from 1987-1988, her voting record was 1.5 standard errors to the left of the median House Democrat. Over time, she drifted back toward the center of her party but, at the time she was elected Speaker, she was still 0.6 standard errors to the left of the party median.

Figure 1 compares Pelosi's voting record to other Members of Congress who were elected Speaker in the post-reform era.[2] At the time of her election, her ideological position within the caucus was similar to that of Speaker O'Neill and Speaker Wright. What is unique about Pelosi's voting record, however, is the path that she took to get there. O'Neill and Wright began their careers as more centrist members of the caucus but drifted to the left over the years. Pelosi started out on the far left of her party and drifted back toward the center over time. Figure 2 demonstrates that this shift occurred in absolute terms, not just relative ones.[3] The last Speaker whose ideology moderated over the course of his career was Speaker Martin, who served two non-consecutive terms as Speaker in the 1940s and 1950s.

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[1] For a full discussion of the New Left, see Dionne 2004, Chapter 1.

[2] In this figure, negative values reflect a voting record that is more centrist than the median party member. Thus, a positive value for a Democrat reflects a voting record to the left of the party median and a positive value for a Republican reflects a voting record to the right of the party median.

[3] For DW-NOMINATE scores, positive numbers are conservative and negative ones are liberal. The algorithm forces scores to show a linear career path.

Thus, Nancy Pelosi brought an unusual brand of politics to the Speakership. Her ideology came from San Francisco and her governing style came from Baltimore. As we will see, that odd mixture is reflected in her performance as Speaker of the House.

The Mood of the Democratic Caucus

In their seminal article on leadership style in the U.S. House, Joseph Cooper and David Brady (1981) argued that successful leaders must adopt the style desired by the caucus. As is often the case in politics, one's preference for leadership style is shaped primarily by what has come before. Thus, when a party has been out of power in the Congress for a significant period of time, it has a substantial pent-up demand for legislation. Thus, the caucus would be likely to desire a leader capable of enacting the party's agenda.

Such was the case in 2007. House Democrats had chafed under the 12-year rule of a Republican House majority—and 6-year rule of a Republican President—whose policies they abhorred. Not only had Democrats failed to enact their own ideas, they had watched as Republican majorities passed legislation that they believed to be destructive. Additionally the tone of political debate had grown poison due to years of partisan wrangling.

So what did the base of the Democratic Party want? They wanted to roll back the Bush era fiscal policies that they saw as wrong-headed counterproductive. They wanted to advance their own policy ideas on health care, environmental, fiscal, and labor policy. And many of them wanted to punish members of an administration

they viewed as having been illegitimately elected and having governed unconstitutionally. House Democrats were ready for a strong leader.

At the beginning of the 111th congress in 2009, that mood was even stronger. Democrats now controlled the White House and had a nearly filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, as well as a substantial majority in the House. They believed that they could now pass all of the items that had been blocked in the two previous years by the President and the Senate. The time appeared right for a strong leader who would push through the Democratic agenda. Party governance was the order of the day.

Leadership Structure

The post-reform era was institutionalized when Democrats reallocated power among party leaders, committee chairs, subcommittee chairs, and the caucus. Previously, power was centralized in the committee chairs and southern Democrats had used the seniority system to guarantee that they controlled most major committees, including the Rules Committee. Thus, legislation could not make it to the House floor without the approval of southern Democrats who were more conservative than the caucus as a whole.

In 1975, Democrats reshuffled the cards. Power was shifted from the committee chairs upward to the party leaders and downward to the subcommittee chairs and caucus members. Party leaders were given authority over the committee assignment process and the selection of committee chairs with the input of caucus representatives. They increased the number of subcommittees and freed the chairs

from dominance by the full committee chairs. Caucus members were given a voice in all decisions of the leadership and he power to veto party leaders' choices for committee chairmanships. In short, Democrats established a collaborative system of party governance.[4]

When Republicans took charge in 1995, they overhauled the structure of party governance. They re-empowered committee chairs by reducing the number of subcommittees and giving full committee chairs greater authority over their work. However, committee chairs were limited to serving for three terms and the seniority system was virtually abolished. Thus, committee chairs were elected by the caucus through a highly competitive process that gave them a great deal of power for a short period of time. Instead of using collaboration to monitor the work of their leaders, Republicans used competition (Butler 2007).

Thus, when Nancy Pelosi came to power, Democrats had two models to draw from in deciding how to allocate power. They could return to the collaborative system of earlier Democrats or keep the Republicans' competitive system. Table 1 demonstrates that Democrats did not significantly expand the number of committees and subcommittees. In 1995, Republicans had reduced the number of committees from 26 to 20 and the number of subcommittees from 142 to 86. By the time they lost the majority, Republicans had allowed the number of committees and subcommittees to grow to 21 and 96 respectively. In 2007, Democrats added one full committee, the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, and six subcommittees, half of which restored three Appropriation subcommittees

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[4] For a thorough discussion of the 1975 reforms, see Rohde 1991.

the Republicans had eliminated. Thus, Democrats did not increase participation in policymaking by expanding the ranks of subcommittee chairs as they had in 1975.

Despite their long-term opposition to term limits of any kind, Democrats adopted them for committee chairs, keeping the policy originally established by the Republicans. However, at the time of their adoption, many analysts were skeptical that they would still be in place in six years when they would first have an impact. However, there is evidence regarding the extent to which Democrats would hold competitive elections for committee chairs.

In 2007, the senior member of each standing committee was chosen as chair with little debate. Some of these chairs had even held that position in 1994 when Democrats last controlled the House. Over the past three years, several openings have occurred due to the death of the committee chair or his shifting to head another panel. In each of these cases, the next most senior Democrat got the nod with very little competition. The only break from seniority occurred when Henry Waxman (CA) defeated John Dingell (MI) for the chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee in 2009. Nonetheless, this takeover closely resembled those of the 1970s and 1980s when an aging chairman whose views on the issues in his committee's jurisdiction were more conservative than the caucus was pushed aside by the second-ranking member whose views were more liberal. Thus, even if Democrats enforce term limits on committee chairs in 2013, there is no sign that they will adopt the Republican model of competitive elections. Instead, they appear headed for a modified seniority system in which the senior member almost always

chairs the committee, but only for a limited time before passing the reins to the next most senior member.

Floor Strategy

Pelosi's first year as Speaker began with House passage of the Democrats' "Six for '06" agenda. Like the Republicans' 1994 Contract With America, "Six for '06" consisted of popular items that had been blocked in previous congresses by the majority party. In the first 100 legislative hours, Speaker Pelosi succeeded at responsible party governance by holding her party together to pass its campaign agenda fully intact.

The remainder of the congress would be much more challenging. Two areas of policy dominated the agenda for the 110th congress: military/intelligence issues and the annual appropriations bills. The political alignment made party governance in these areas extraordinarily difficult. Regarding military/intelligence issues, President Bush had ordered a surge of forces in Iraq and sought authorization (mandated by the Supreme Court) for the detention and surveillance policies he had put in place shortly after 9/11. Most Democrats wanted the military to withdraw from Iraq and opposed the President's intelligence initiatives. In the Senate, Democrats held a small majority, insufficient to break a Republican filibuster.

On these issues, Speaker Pelosi had the House pass a maximalist position, putting into effect timelines for withdrawal from Iraq and sharp restrictions on the President's detention and surveillance policies. The Senate was unable to do so, and ultimately acquiesced to the Republican policies with only minor amendments when

funding was about to run out and authorizations were about to expire. Rather than cut the best possible deal and declaring victory, Pelosi refused to compromise. Instead, she allowed the conference reports to pass the House with the support of virtually all Republicans and a small number of moderate Democrats. Most Speakers would have avoided such a public defeat for fear that it would diminish their power. Pelosi emphasized position taking over victory, believing it necessary to demonstrate clearly the differences between the two parties on these issues.

On appropriations bills, Pelosi avoided conflict. In 2007, appropriators in the two chambers ultimately reached compromises with the White House that allowed for their belated passage. In 2008, President Bush sharpened his rhetoric by threatening to veto any bills that spent more than his budget request. Rather than provoking a public conflict, Democrats passed a continuing resolution that delayed spending decisions until a new president would be inaugurated. They believed that the Democrats would retake the White House, so the new President would sign appropriations bills that spent significantly more than anything they would be able to negotiate with Bush.

As they expected, the political climate changed dramatically after the November elections. Democrats did indeed reclaim the White House, along with a substantially larger margin in the House. By spring, it became clear that Democrats would soon also have a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. Pure responsible party governance appeared possible as Republicans had no capacity to block initiatives backed by a unified Democratic Party. House and Senate Democrats quickly executed their plan for increased domestic spending as they belatedly

passed the appropriations bills left over from the previous years. After that, they moved on to the more difficult items on their agenda—legislation on climate change and comprehensive health care reform.

On these issues, Speaker Pelosi has continued to emphasize position taking. Climate change legislation passed the House with a very narrow majority, and the same appears to be happening on health care reform. On these major parts of the Democratic Party agenda, Pelosi appears to be adopting a strategy of having the House pass a bill as far to the left as possible for its opening position.

As neither of these measures has yet passed the Senate, we cannot be certain as to whether the Speaker is replicating her strategy from the previous congress. Although the first move is identical, the ultimate strategy may be different. With Democrats in charge of the White House and having a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, Democrats have a unique opportunity to enact legislation that they have long favored. Pelosi may have concluded that the farther left the House begins, the farther it will be able to drag the Senate in accepting a compromise bill.

Conclusions

Nancy Pelosi's political background is reflected in her leadership style as Speaker of the House. Her exposure to the Baltimore machine taught her that parties could be mobilized to advance a policy agenda. Her political ideology, consistent with her San Francisco base, energized her to push for legislation as far to the left as her party would allow. Moreover, her ascension to the Speakership after twelve years of Republican rule created the opportunity to engage in responsible

party governance. The rank-and-file of her party wanted to enact an aggressive policy agenda and has given her the necessary power to accomplish that goal.

Nonetheless, her leadership appears so far to be personal and situational, not institutional. She accepted the institutional structure of her Republican predecessors rather than returning to the Democratic Party model. She has not re-established the Democrats' participatory approach to party governance, but she has not instituted the vibrant competition of the Republican approach either. Rather, she has taken the Republican institutional structure and the Democratic values as givens, deviating only if there was a roadblock to passing the party agenda. When the chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee was held by a member the party did not deem strong enough on environmental issues, she first worked around the problem by establishing a new committee on Energy Independence and Global Warning, headed by a staunch environmentalist. Then she allowed the Energy and Commerce Committee chair to be replaced by someone more acceptable to the liberal base of the caucus.

Where Pelosi has had the opportunity to appoint people to positions of leadership, she has pushed aside rivals and elevated allies. She unsuccessfully tried to get John Murtha (PA) elected to the Majority Leader position over her rival and second-in-command Steny Hoyer (MD). Also, she refused to reappoint Jane Harman (CA), whom she had clashed with in the past, to a new term as chair of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. But even there Pelosi replaced Harman with the next most senior member of the committee who was untainted by scandal.

On the floor, Pelosi has pushed the caucus to pass legislation as far to the left as possible. She has carved out narrow majorities on key agenda items, personally lobbying moderates to obtain the last needed votes for passage. She appears determined to take advantage of this rare opportunity to enact a Democratic Party agenda, even if she has to sacrifice the seats of a significant number of her party members. As a result, the Washing press is full of accounts of moderate Democrats expressing their fear of defeat and their reluctance to go out on a limb for health care reform having already done so on climate change.

Speaker Pelosi's approach to party governance may well prove effective in the current political climate. However, she has not put in place an institutional structure that allows the caucus to participate in the decision-making process either through collaboration or competition. She is therefore vulnerable to meeting the same fate as her predecessors Jim Wright and Newt Gingrich, who got too far in front of their colleagues and were removed from power when things went bad.

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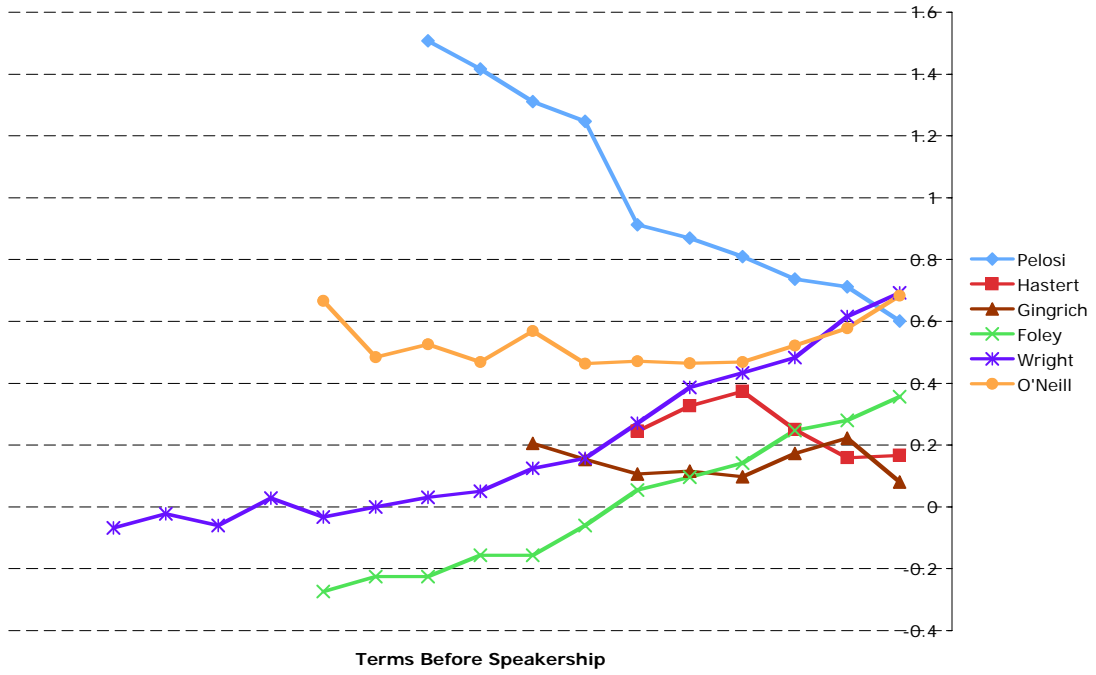**Figure 1: DW-Nominate Scores of Future Speakers Relative to Their Caucus**
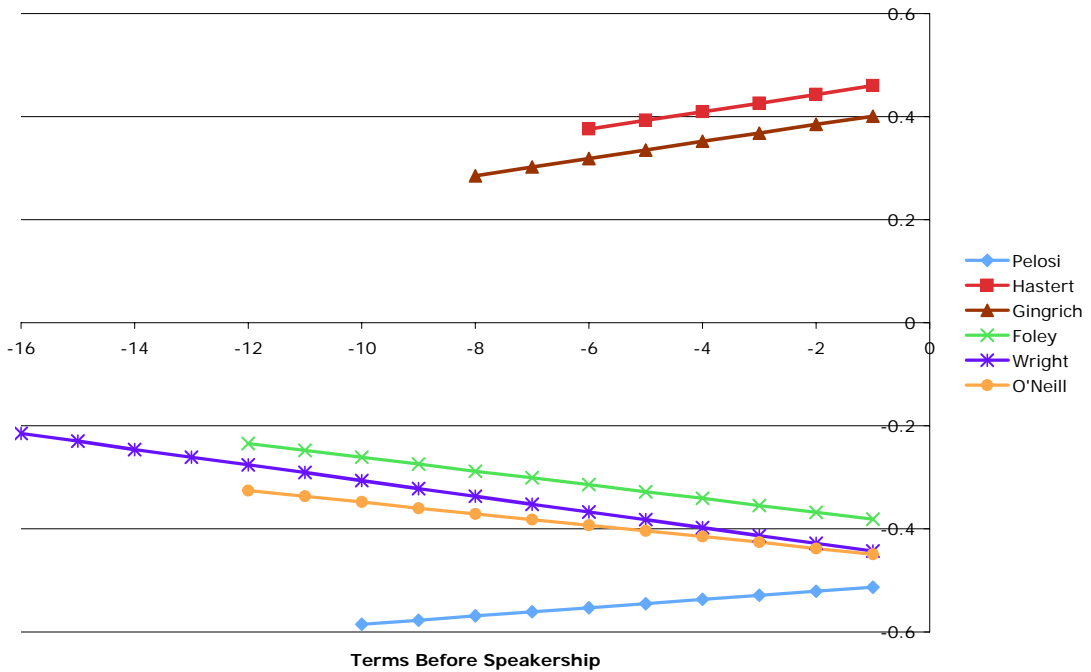

Terms Before Speakership

Figure 2: DW-Nominate Scores of Future Speakers

Terms Before Speakership

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Table 1: Number of House Committees and Subcommittees, Selected Congresses

Congress	Committees	Subcommittees
103rd (1993-1994)	26	142
104th (1995-1996)	20	86
108th (2003-2004)	21	97
109th (2005-2006)	21	96
110th (2007-2008)	22	102
111th (2009-2010)	22	101