



# Spotlight US Election 2008

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## The 111th Congress A Democratic Tidal Wave

It has been only days since Barack Obama was decisively elected the next President of the United States and already pundits and politicians are discussing the pros and cons of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, contested Senate races, and Obama's new cabinet members. One U.S. Congress cycle covers two years, so the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, which has served since January 2007, will give way to the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, which will convene for the first time in early January 2009. The 435 members of the House of Representatives serve a 2-year term each, while U.S. Senators serve a 6-year term.

Democrats gained 18 seats in the balance of the House this election, with over 30 new Democratic Members of Congress taking seats—the so-called “freshmen”. The 111<sup>th</sup> Congress currently looks to hold a majority of 254 Democrats to 173 Republicans, with several races remaining undecided. In the Senate, the balance is 55 Democrats, 40 Republicans, and 2 Independents (Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Bernie Sanders of Vermont), with 3 highly publicized undecided races. This number is not the “filibuster-proof” majority of 60 Democrats had hoped for—a filibuster is a way for minority Senators to hold off roll-call votes by giving speeches and debating, unless overruled by 3/5 of the Senate.

How will the new House work with President Obama? While there is a Democratic majority, the gains are smaller than hoped for by many Democrats. There are varying opinions on this phenomenon—some experts say that people voted “Obama” not “Democratic” and may not have voted the straight Democratic ticket. Obama will need to work with a diverse group of Republicans and a growing number of moderate and conservative Democrats. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi acknowledged this when she remarked that action “will have to be bipartisan, again bipartisan and comprehensive, and it has to adhere to fiscal soundness . . .” (*Washington Post* 11/6/2008).

The diversity of the new Democratic caucus [Democratic members of the House] means that there will have to be good strategic planning. There are dozens of “caucuses” or self-organized groups and committees within the U.S. House, ranging from special interest areas to influential caucuses based on political affiliation or ethnicity. In particular, Obama will need to deal with the “Blue Dog” Democratic group, a growing caucus of Democrats, formed in 1995, who are fiscally and socially conservative. Many “Blue Dogs” come from traditionally conservative areas such as the American South, and have tried to use their swing vote power to liaise between moderate Republicans and liberal Democrats. The “Blue Dogs” currently have 49 members, of whom 6 are women and under a dozen are people of color.

There are two other influential ideologically based groups in the House—the “New Democrat Coalition” and the “Congressional Progressive Caucus”. The “New Democrats” fall somewhere between the “Blue Dogs” and the “Progressives” in their views, claiming to be centrist, and focusing on international issues like fair trade deals and immigration issues, although the left has criticized the “New Democrats” for ignoring social justice issues. The “New Democrats Coalition”, which has a total membership of 58 Representatives and 15 Senators, 14 women and less than one third members of color, includes Loretta Sanchez (D-CA), Ron Kind (D-WI), and Russ Carnahan (D-MO). The “Progressive Caucus” represents about a third of all House Democrats, with 71 current members, including Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), Tom Udall (D-NM), Linda Sanchez (D-CA), and Ed Markey (D-MA). Founded by now-Independent Bernie Sanders in 1991, the Progressive Caucus is the largest partisan caucus in the House, has a higher percentage of ethnic minority members than the other two partisan caucuses, and focuses on social issues like universal healthcare, labor unions, gay marriage, and fair trade issues.

Who are the new members of Congress? Democrats dominated races in areas where Republicans were retiring—the main reason was the economic climate, an issue that dominated the campaign. One poll noted that of the 86% of people who worried about the economic climate, 56% of them voted Democratic. What can we expect from the Democratic “freshmen”? According to one source, new Members of Congress are expected to sit down, follow their leaders, meet with constituents and co-sign on legislation. It is an unwritten rule that newcomers do not engage in international affairs at first. The overarching theme for the entire 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, of course, will be the economy.

This election was an especially interesting one because of the 30 “freshmen” Democrats, 18 won races in a previously Republican district. New Democratic winners from Southern states tend to be more conservative and may be good candidates for the Blue Dog Coalition. One new Democratic Member of Congress is Betsy Markey (D-CO), who will be the first Democrat since 1973 to occupy a House seat for Northeastern Colorado. Similarly, Gary Peters (D-MI) is the first Democrat to represent Michigan’s 9<sup>th</sup> District since 1893—his opponent blamed factors such as the economy and the unpopularity of President George W. Bush for his own loss. Kathy Dahlkemper (D-PA) replaced a Republican incumbent, campaigning on a failed economy that she blamed on her opponent. In New York, Paul Tonko (D-NY), replacing another Democrat, ran on a platform of creating “green-collar jobs” and revitalizing the local economy along with the environment. In another close election, Bobby Bright (D-AL) became the first Democratic representative since 1962 by a small margin of votes. Suzanne Kosmas (D-FL) was yet another Democrat to win a seat against an incumbent Republican in a long-time conservative area, opponents conceded defeat in the face of a “Democratic tidal wave”.

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