



## Democrats as House Committee Chairs, A New Era of Expertise

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By Martin Frost

Every election when House Republicans are in trouble (like this one), they start talking about how the world will come to an end when certain Democrats become committee chairmen.

Sometimes, Republican-affiliated campaign groups will even produce a flyer or a newspaper ad selectively showing the pictures of African American congressmen and liberal white congressmen (using pictures that are 30 years old that make them look like hippies), who would hold committee gavels if the Democrats are back in the majority.

Somehow, these questionable pieces of literature show up almost exclusively in rural and white suburban areas.

The 2006 version of the Republican Party may be a little more subtle this time out but don't be surprised to see the same basic argument.

And so, it's worth examining the 18 Democrats who we know will chair major committees (some decisions about other committees have yet to be made by the Democratic leader or the Democratic caucus) if the Democrats win the House on Nov. 7.

These are all people I know personally from my 26 years in the House and there is a general pattern -- they are all experienced, knowledgeable pros who will know what to do from the very first day. It's not their ideology that should scare Republicans, but rather their level of competence.

And, by the way, their overall mainstream ideology will surprise a lot of people.

**Agriculture:** Colin Peterson of Minnesota. Peterson is a conservative Blue Dog Democrat who knows a great deal about the nation's farm programs.

**Appropriations:** David Obey of Wisconsin. Obey is a very smart liberal who previously chaired the committee and will give administration officials fits by asking tough questions and never fudging the numbers.

**Armed Services:** Ike Skelton of Missouri. Skelton is a pro-defense moderate who has grown increasingly frustrated with the way the Bush administration has mishandled Iraq. He is a friend of the military.

**Budget:** John Spratt of South Carolina. Spratt is a moderate Southerner who hates deficit spending and will force the Bush administration to be more honest with their budget.

**Education and Workforce:** George Miller of California. Miller is an old-line liberal who is very close to Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. He has been in Congress for more than 30 years and knows a great deal about the programs supervised by his committee.

**Energy and Commerce:** John Dingell of Michigan. Dingell is the Dean of the House (he presided over the House Medicare debate as a young member in 1965) and will keep the Bush administration honest on a wide range of subjects including health care, energy and insurance. He is a tough, no-nonsense guy who is resourceful and hard working.

**Financial Services:** Barney Frank of Massachusetts. Frank is one of the few openly gay members of the House and an old line liberal. However, banking and other financial interests have a healthy respect for his intellect and his willingness to listen to all sides.

**Government Reform:** Henry Waxman of California. Waxman has been in the House for 32 years and is widely respected on both sides of the aisle as being tenacious and smart. Waxman will finally have a chance to show how hearings to oversee the activities of the executive branch should be run. Republicans have more to fear from him than any single potential chairman, not due to partisan zeal but due to competence and diligence.

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**Homeland Security:** Bennie Thompson of Mississippi. Thompson is a tough, smart but soft-spoken African American member who has taken his homeland security duties very seriously. He is steady as a rock and has survived very harsh racial politics in Mississippi by always staying one step ahead of everyone else.

**International Relations:** Tom Lantos of California. Lantos is the only Holocaust survivor in Congress and has been relatively hawkish on foreign policy. He is a major advocate of human rights around the world and a staunch supporter of Israel.

**Judiciary:** John Conyers of Michigan. Conyers will be one of three African-American members to chair major committees and clearly has an independent streak. Democratic Leader Pelosi made it very clear during a recent "Meet the Press" appearance that she will not sanction unnecessary and divisive forays into issues like impeachment.

**Resources:** Nick Rahall of West Virginia. Rahall comes from a mining state so he must always pay attention to that industry. He normally tries to strike a balance between environmental and business interests.

**Rules:** Louise Slaughter of New York. Slaughter will be one of two women to chair committees. A New Yorker with a southern accent (she grew up in Kentucky), she is charming and fair-minded but can be plenty tough and will know how to use the Rules Committee to further the program of the Democratic Leadership.

**Science:** Bart Gordon of Tennessee. Gordon is an adept moderate southerner who has survived politically in an increasingly conservative state. He eventually will have to choose between the Science Committee gavel and a subcommittee chairmanship on Energy and Commerce.

**Small Business:** Nydia Velazquez of New York. Velazquez will be the only Hispanic and one of only two women to chair major committees. She is a savvy New York pol who cares deeply about small business.

**Transportation:** Jim Oberstar of Minnesota. Oberstar, another 30-year veteran of Congress, knows more about transportation issues than anyone else in the House, anyone in the Senate and anyone in the Bush administration. He could be a star in a Democratic Congress.

**Veterans Affairs:** Bob Filner of California. Filner is an old line liberal, having taken part in civil rights work in the South during the mid-1960's. His San Diego hometown has a large concentration of veterans and he can be expected to be an active advocate on behalf of veterans across the country.

**Ways and Means:** Charlie Rangel of New York. Republicans will make a serious mistake if they play the race card on Rangel, one of three African Americans who would chair major committees. Rangel knows a great deal about tax policy and is one of the smartest members of the House. He was for Hillary Clinton early for the Senate and is a real power in New York politics.

It is not entirely clear who would chair Ethics, Intelligence or House Administration in a Democratic Congress. A final decision on each will be made by Leader Pelosi and the Democratic Caucus after the election.

Republicans will attack the potential Intelligence Chair Alcee Hastings of Florida on the basis that he was impeached as a federal judge years ago. Hastings has been a steady member of Congress since his election 14 years ago. Pelosi has yet to make a final decision on this post.

At least seven of the chairmen will be in their 70's and might only serve a few terms; however, no one should take any of them lightly. They have all been waiting since 1994 for the opportunity to write law and influence public policy. Unlike some of the Republicans who became committee chairs in 1995 when the House last changed hands, this group has been around the track and there won't be any learning curve.

The sky may fall on the Republicans once this group becomes chairmen but it won't be for racial or ideological reasons. It will be because they will know what to do from day one.

*Martin Frost served in Congress from 1979 to 2005, representing a diverse district in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. He served two terms as chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, the third-ranking leadership position for House Democrats, and two terms as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Frost serves as a regular contributor to FOX News Channel and is a scholar in residence at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. He holds a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri and a law degree from the Georgetown Law Center.*