

Democrats' plans ambitious, limited; Slim victory margins and '08 jockeying narrow the scope. Immigration could be an exception.

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Body

Fresh from their election-day victories, Democrats were promising yesterday to push for changes on policy issues ranging from health care to the war in Iraq.

But the inevitable jockeying for the 2008 presidential elections and thin margins in the House and apparently the Senate virtually guarantee that any changes will likely be modest, political analysts say.

"It is certainly a big message election, both on the war in Iraq and the party in power being in power too long; what comes out of that legislatively, it is not likely to be a productive Congress," said John Fortier, an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute.

Fortier and others said one exception could be immigration. Bush's proposal to legalize millions of illegal immigrants while bolstering border security likely has more support among Democrats than among Republicans.

House Republican leaders killed the plan earlier this year. But Bush could seek to cast himself as a voice of conciliation by reaching out to Democrats, much as President Bill Clinton did by aligning himself with Republicans on welfare legislation. Clinton's gambit enraged some fellow Democrats but played well with the broader electorate.

"Bush has an opportunity to forge a consensus with Democrats and get himself off to a fast start, showing that he is a bipartisan politician" with an immigration bill, said Rick Semiatin, an assistant professor of political science at American University.

Bush might also be open to some compromise on Iraq policy. In fact, the resignation of Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld yesterday was widely interpreted as a response by Bush to voters' views that the war is going badly.

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D., Del.) said he expected the loss of the House and possibly the Senate would persuade the Republican White House to reach out to Democrats on Iraq. Biden says he already has gotten expressions of support from Republicans for his proposal to further decentralize the Iraqi government and give more autonomy to the nation's three major ethnic and religious groups: the Kurds and the Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

"I think the president will have to listen," Biden said.

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But other Democratic initiatives are likely to stall, because of resistance not only from congressional Republicans but also from the White House.

Among the items cited by the likely next House speaker, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.), are changes to the Medicare prescription-drug benefit that would permit the government to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices. Currently, those negotiations, which are **limited** in **scope**, are handled by scores of private health-care **plans** that provide the benefit directly to seniors. Bush would likely veto any such proposal.

Critics of the current law say that the government is wasting billions of dollars and that the drug benefit could be reduced in the future if the government fails to negotiate drug prices. Sen. Olympia J. Snowe (R., Maine) has been a proponent of giving Medicare the ability to bargain with drug companies.

However, health-care analyst Joseph Antos of the American Enterprise Institute says the agency that currently oversees the Medicare drug benefit doesn't have anywhere near the staff it would need to negotiate price on the thousands of medications furnished through the program.

Antos contends that the program now is working reasonably well and that politicians would risk a backlash if they restructured the system.

"People [in Congress] think about the next election and you don't want to be the person on Capitol Hill who told everyone that they had to change their health **plan**," Antos said.

At the same time, Antos anticipates that Bush's health-care initiatives, particularly proposed refinements to health savings accounts, will stall.

Bush and his Republican allies on Capitol Hill likely also will be stalled on judicial nominees, said Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia. Tobias says the White House probably will not nominate the most conservative candidates because **Democrats** have more leverage.

"The president will have to work more closely with the **Democrats** than he has in the past," Tobias said.

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