

# NEW YORK POST

## The seniority trap

By BETSY McCAUGHEY

November 1, 2010

Republicans are expected to win enough seats in tomorrow's elections to control the House of Representatives. Already, GOP chiefs are divvying up key committee chairmanships -- with the same people who ran things last time 'round jockeying to get their power back. If that happens, voters who supported Republican candidates to rein in the cost of government will be defeated after the election by the seniority system in Washington.

Tea Party candidates promised voters they'd end profligate spending, earmarks and political deal-making. Those who win tomorrow must be heard and heeded when they get to Washington, rather than relegated to unimportant jobs.

The GOP lost control of the House four years ago in no small part because voters had come to doubt the party's commitment to controlling spending. Voters now seem outraged enough at Democrats' overspending to give Republicans another chance. But the party chiefs may blow it.

One of the most powerful jobs in the House is to chair the Appropriations Committee, which divides up billions of dollars of federal funds. It's the favor factory. Appropriators rise to top leadership positions in both parties because they decide whose pet projects get funded. By definition, reining in federal spending means reining in the appropriators' power.

The leading contender for Appropriations Committee chair is Rep. Jerry Lewis of California, a prototype of the lifelong politician. He's been in Congress 32 years. He rose to the chairmanship in 2005 and stayed on as ranking minority member when the GOP lost the House in 2006.

Under GOP House rules, Lewis shouldn't be able to retain his party's top slot on the committee for more than three terms, but Lewis is expected to ask for a waiver -- and likely will get it.

Such decisions are made by the Republican House Steering Committee -- whose chairman, Rep. John Boehner, will become speaker if voters give Republicans the House majority. The deliberations on bestowing chairmanships are secret, but generally consider seniority along with popularity: who raises the most money for GOP candidates, toes the party line, gets along best with other members, etc.

House Republicans imposed term limits on chairmanships in January 1995, making good on a key promise of their Contract With America and ensuring that the message the voters had sent in the 1994 election upheaval would have an impact on what actually occurred in the House.

Now, as then, opening House leadership positions to newer members is vital to changing Congress' pro-spending ways. Term limits are meaningless, if they can be overridden by cronies.

The prospect of getting a waiver is the ultimate incentive for a chairman to dispense costly favors, in utter disregard of taxpayers or the federal debt.

GOP newcomers in Congress should jump all over this. To rein in spending, they should demand that the Appropriations Committee be handed over to serious cost-cutters -- not the same old figures who failed to stop earmarks, put up with TARP and played along with the Democrats' vast ballooning of the federal debt.

Waivers are reportedly also in the works so that chairmanships of other committees, including the Energy and Commerce Committee and the Rules Committee, will go to the same figures who held those jobs the last time the Republicans were in the majority. That's outrageous.

Polls indicate that voters aren't only shifting their preference from Democrats controlling Congress to Republicans. Voters are also anti-incumbent. They know that lawmakers who have been in Washington for years ignore what the public wants. Candidates who win on Tuesday must go to Washington determined to end the oligarchy and restore representative government.

It's common sense that newly elected Congress members are likely to be truer representatives of the people than members who've held their seats for decades, climbed the seniority ladder, and catered to the Washington establishment. Yet party leaders will try to consign newcomers to unimportant assignments.

Other GOP members should also think twice about letting the old bulls run the show. This is *not* the way to hold onto the majority that the Democrats are forfeiting because of *their* big-spending ways. For 2010 to be a watershed, the rules must change.

At last February's Conservative Action Political Conference, Boehner was asked how he'd handle the Tea Partiers if he became speaker. He promised to listen to them and open the House to their influence: "I'll pledge to you right here, right now, that we're going to run the House differently." We'll soon see if he's ready to keep that promise.

*Betsy McCaughey is a former New York lieutenant governor. [betsy@defendyourhealthcare.us](mailto:betsy@defendyourhealthcare.us)*