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Senate Committee Assignments Announced

Senate Democrats and Republicans on Thursday announced their respective committee assignments for the 112th Congress, with Democrats selecting new chairmen for the Veterans Affairs' and Indian Affairs panels.

Republicans placed new faces on nearly every panel, including a remarkable six freshmen on the Appropriations Committee.

Patty Murray, D-Wash., takes the gavel of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, a nod to her role as the top spokeswoman on veterans' issues for Senate Democrats for the past two Congresses. Daniel K. Akaka of Hawaii, who led Veterans' Affairs in the last Congress, will take over the chairmanship of the Indian Affairs Committee, which was left open by the retirement of Byron L. Dorgan, D-N.D.

With the number of Republicans increasing from 42 at the end of the last Congress to 47 this year, Democrats' advantage on committees is dropping to one or two seats on most panels. In the previous Congress, Democrats had three, four and even six more seats on committees. The closer split could make committee votes on legislation more unpredictable.

The reshuffling gives the 16 new Republican senators — a third of the 47-member conference — seats on every committee except the highly coveted Finance panel. John Thune, R-S.D., and Tom Coburn, R-Okla., were given seats on that committee, reflecting their increasing stature. Both were first elected in 2004, and Thune is drawing some mentions as a potential 2012 presidential contender.

On the Democratic side, Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland gained a slot on Finance, giving up a seat on the Judiciary Committee.

APPROPRIATIONS CHANGES

The Appropriations Committee, once highly sought after by veteran senators hoping to steer federal funds to their home states, has seven new GOP members. Only one, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, is not a freshman.

The six freshman appropriators are Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, Roy Blunt of Missouri, Jerry Moran of Kansas, Dan Coats of Indiana, John Hoeven of North Dakota and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin.

Graham is well known for his willingness to work with Democrats, despite his solidly conservative instincts.

Kirk served on the House Appropriations Committee in the last Congress, showing a deep interest in foreign affairs and federal finances. Increasingly concerned about the national debt, he memorably used his seat on the Financial Services subcommittee to grill Obama administration officials, including Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner, about the nation's ability to continue to line up buyers for its bond auctions.

Coats, a former senator, returned to the chamber for the 112th Congress after stressing the need to curb the rising U.S. debt. He earlier served on the Armed Services and Intelligence committees.

Blunt, a former House whip, earned a reputation in that chamber as a business-friendly conservative and a dealmaker. Once spoken of as a potential future Speaker, he became one of his party's senior leaders due to his willingness to do favors for colleagues and ability to stay cool under fire.

Moran describes himself as a conservative, but not overly partisan. He has said he intends to work with senators of both parties. He has an independent streak; in 2003, he voted against the Republican-sponsored Medicare prescription drug program because he considered it a budget buster, and he has sided with many Democrats in supporting an easing of restrictions on trade with Cuba.

Hoeven, who last year was governor of North Dakota, was promised an Appropriations seat long ago, something he highlighted in his campaign. Johnson, a business owner and accountant who had never served in public office before winning election to the Senate, has little good to say about the business practices of the federal government or the way it accounts for its money.

All of the Republican appropriators will be focused more sharply on cutting spending this year than snaring funds for their states, now that Republicans have adopted a ban on funding for member projects and President Obama has vowed to veto any bill that reaches his desk with earmarks in it.

No new Democrats will serve on the panel, though the majority will hold a 16-13 ratio.

SHRINKING PIE

The overall number of seats available on committees fell by 12 — from 416 to 404 — but the average senator will still sit on four panels.

Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., had 12 more committee slots overall to divvy up compared with last Congress. Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., had 24 fewer slots to assign.

The Senate must ratify both Republican and Democratic committee assignments via an organizing resolution before committees can formally conduct business. The Senate also must approve an overall budget for committees and individual budgets. Some Senate Republicans have been pushing for cuts of 5 percent to 15 percent overall, given the record federal budget deficit. The Republican House cut its member and committee budgets by 5 percent earlier this month and trimmed its Appropriations Committee budget by 9 percent.

Senate Democrats generally assign their chairmanships by seniority. Following retirements, election defeats and subsequent reshuffling, the new chairmen include Murray at Veterans' Affairs, Akaka at Indian Affairs, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan at Agriculture, Tim Johnson of South Dakota at Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, and Bob Casey of Pennsylvania at the Joint Economic Committee.

Under Senate Republican Conference rules, the GOP members of each committee will formally elect their ranking member. That choice generally follows seniority.

Conference rules limit GOP senators to six years as ranking member. New ranking members as a result of term limits, retirements and the subsequent reshuffling include Orrin G. Hatch of Utah on Finance, Charles E. Grassley of

Iowa on Judiciary, Jeff Sessions of Alabama on Budget, Saxby Chambliss of Georgia on Intelligence, Pat Roberts of Kansas on Agriculture and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee on Rules and Administration.

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