

Welch readies for new power dynamic in U.S. House

By Peter Hirschfeld, Vermont Press Bureau
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In the Nov. 2 election, Vermont's lone congressman withstood the wave of anti-incumbent sentiment that cost so many of his Democratic colleagues their seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But Rep. Peter Welch, who coasted to a third term over Tea Party opponent Paul Beaudry, will nonetheless feel the effects of a watershed election that shifted the balance of power in the U.S. House.

"He's going to be miserable," said Garrison Nelson, a professor of political science at the University of Vermont.

Nelson, who has authored seven volumes on the history of legislative committees in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, said the power shift will undermine whatever influence Welch enjoyed under a liberal Democratic majority.

"He's a liberal. This is a very conservative group of people that are coming into the Hill, and the House of Representatives in particular, and it's not going to be much fun being a member of the minority," Nelson said.

Welch is more optimistic. The bipartisan alliances he forged during his first four years in office, Welch said, will serve him well in the 112th Congress.

"Down here in Congress I've worked hard to establish relationships with Republicans," Welch said.

"When I was on the Rules Committee, I met all the ranking Republicans who will now be chairmen and chairwomen of committees."

But he admits that life in the minority — Democrats lost 64 seats in the U.S. House in the recent election — will impede progress on his agenda.

"The big agenda will now be established in the House by Republicans," Welch said. "And that will not be my agenda. There will be a lot of defense I have to play."

It could also cost him his coveted seat on the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, where legislation introduced and sponsored by Welch has won plaudits from Vermont businesses and environmentalists.

"We've changed majorities, and that will affect the constitution of committees," Welch said. "But who is on the committees is still a work in progress. We'll just have to stay tuned on that."

Welch said his majority-party status played a key role in his major legislative accomplishments, including an energy-efficiency retrofit program that appropriated millions of dollars in loans and grants for projects on homes and businesses.

"Being a member of the majority was very helpful," Welch said. "I had a seat at the table and Vermont had some very good ideas that I was able to bring to the table."

With the power shift, he said, prospects for his own legislative goals are suddenly less rosy.

"The new (energy and commerce) committee will be led by people that don't believe in global warming, support a fossil fuel economy and want to repeal the health care bill," he said. "It's a different context, and there's a lot less opportunity to be proactive and much more pressure to defend the progress we've made."

Matt Cota, head of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, said the Vermont heating oil industry, which has benefited by Welch's presence on three energy subcommittees, will lose a valuable ally if Welch is booted from the Energy Committee.

"He has done a number of things in his four years in Congress and by virtue of his seat on the Energy Committee in particular that have been helpful to heating oil retailers," Cota said.

For instance, Cota said, Welch was a leading voice for Wall Street reform, specifically a piece of legislation that sought to eliminate the commodities speculation that Cota's industry blamed for high fuel prices.

But that bill won't go into effect until January at the earliest, and the rules that will give it regulatory teeth have yet to be written.

"We're now contending with industry-financed lobbyists who are trying to gut the law through the implementation of rules," Cota said.

The new majority could also constrain Welch's ability to secure Vermont-specific appropriations in budget bills. Welch has successfully requested millions of dollars in earmarks for municipalities, nonprofits and "jobs-creating" projects.

"The Republican leadership is saying they're going to ban any directed spending or earmarks," Welch said. "That certainly would affect Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and every other state in the country."

Welch said he'll spend much of the next term warding off Republican attempts to gut the health-care reform bill signed into law earlier this year.

"There will be a lot of defense I have to play," Welch said. "I'll fight hard to maintain progress on health care — they'll try to repeal health care. ... What Republicans want to do and what's good for Vermont are in direct conflict."

But Welch also thinks he'll find areas of common ground with the new majority.

"At another level, there will be practical things we can do," he said. "And I'm going to find ways to do them."