

Peter Friedmann's View from Washington DC

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Everybody's on their own now. For the past five and half years we've essentially seen two teams, sometimes three, on the Congressional playing field. Everyone on the Democratic side follows the play called by their quarterbacks in the House or Senate - Nancy Pelosi in the House or Harry Reid in the Senate. Democrats stayed together on votes, both the mundane and routine, as well as the controversial, such as the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). Meanwhile, there have been two Republican teams on the field simultaneously. In the House we have the "establishment" Republican team led by Speaker John Boehner, frequently challenged by the "tea party" team, with multiple and rotating leaders. Often the true battle in the House has been between these two Republican teams, rather than against the Democratic team. In the Senate, we've seen much the same with a few so-called "tea party" Republicans willing to filibuster, or at least intercede in some way in a process which would otherwise be dictated by the quarterback of the establishment Republicans, Mitch McConnell.

But the playing field is about to change. The objective on the Democratic side is no longer to advance President Obama's legislative, regulatory, environmental, foreign-policy and political objectives, as it has been for the past five and half years. The primary objective in both the House and Senate is to gain or maintain Democratic seats. In the House, the Democrats would dearly love to capture sufficient seats to place Nancy Pelosi back in the Speaker's chair. That is highly unlikely to happen. But on the Senate side things are in the air. The sheer numbers of Democrats up for reelection, and the many who are running for reelection in states that Mitt Romney carried, has some respected pollsters predicting that Republicans will regain the Majority in the Senate. In fact, that is really all this town is talking about now, and all that will be discussed between now and November 4. It is a dynamic which influences every vote, every Committee hearing and the introduction of every bill from now until November – what will be the impact on the ability of the Republicans to regain the Senate Majority, or the Democrats to hold on to it?

Until November 4, Senators no longer consider whether his or her bill advances the President's agenda, rather the question is, does it advance his or her own reelection chances or his party's quest for Senate Majority. The quarterback of the Senate Democratic team Harry Reid understands this well, providing great leeway to any Democratic senator who is up for reelection, to vote in the way that will help him or her most in his or her home state. The same is happening on the Republican side in the Senate where even the quarterback of the establishment Republicans, Mitch McConnell is locked in the political race of his life. If he survives and is reelected, it will not be because he advanced some general Republican agenda, but because he is perceived by the voters in Kentucky as advancing a Kentucky agenda. And he will certainly allow each Republican Senate candidate around the country to make this same calculation.

So don't be surprised if we see both Democrats and Republicans making statements, introducing legislation, issuing press releases, or voting in a way that departs from their records of the past five years. Democrats running in more conservative states will look much more conservative. And Republicans in liberal states will start taking more "liberal" positions.

Where does this leave the President? Frankly, out in the cold. He understands the political dynamic at play. And he certainly is going to support any member of the Democratic caucus who has to shift positions in order to gain reelection. In fact there is nothing the President fears more than trying to govern

with both the House and Senate in Republican hands, which would be the death knell of his own agenda during the last two years of his term. So, we can expect the President to make fewer demands of Congress and of his fellow Democrats between now and November 4, in order to allow as many of them as possible to win reelection.

Does this mean nothing can be accomplished? Far from it. Since Members of Congress must now focus on showing their constituents that they can actually govern, that they can pass important legislation, they will do so. Next week we will see a new Water Resources Development Act (port maintenance and enhancements) passed; simultaneously the senate will move a bipartisan MAP-21 reauthorization through Committee (highway and transit. We may even see action on international trade legislation before Congress adjourns – not major policy initiatives such as the TransPacific Partnership, but rather “housekeeping”, such as Customs reauthorization bill, Generalized System of Preferences, Miscellaneous Tariff Bill, etc.

The coming six months will be dynamic on Capitol Hill. The quarterbacks of the establishment Republicans and Democrats, and the President, will no longer be calling all the plays. Many of the individual Senators and Congress people will be freelancing out there on what will be a very interesting playing field.

Peter Friedmann