

New Senate leaders cut across political assumptions_112904

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Senate Democrats, whose party officially supports abortion rights, have elected an abortion opponent as their leader. Meanwhile, Senate Republicans, whose party officially opposes abortion, appear ready to name a rare pro-choice senator as chair of one of the Senate's most powerful committees.

Senate Democrats elected Nevada Sen. Harry Reid as minority leader by acclamation. Reid, a Mormon, is a longtime opponent of abortion rights who voted in favor of a 2003 law that bans so-called "partial-birth" abortions.

On the Republican side, Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter appears to have quelled an uproar from social conservatives against his elevation to the chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Specter is a moderate who supports abortion rights and who generally supported church-state separation.

Dozens of Religious Right groups and other conservative organizations had

asked Specter's colleagues to bar him from the chairmanship after comments he made to reporters shortly after President Bush was re-elected. Specter implied Bush should not bother sending far-right nominees for Supreme Court vacancies to the Senate for confirmation, because they would likely be filibustered by Democrats.

Nominees to the federal bench first must be confirmed by the Senate Judiciary Committee, and the chairman has wide latitude over which nominees receive a hearing.

But after meetings with Senate GOP leaders and Republican Judiciary Committee members, several expressed support for Specter.

"Senator Specter handled himself very well" in the meeting, said outgoing committee Chairman Orrin Hatch of Utah, according to the Washington Post. "I'm for him, as I should be."

But in an e-mail newsletter, Tony Perkins of the conservative Family Research Council asked supporters not to let up pressure on other senators, since a majority of the entire Senate Republican Conference must confirm Specter's nomination when the group meets Jan. 5 to organize for the new session of Congress.

"Each Republican senator must be challenged to stand up for the values of the voters that helped them gain solid control of the Senate, rather than capitulate to the political protocol that advances privilege above principle," Perkins wrote.

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