

New Congress brings hope for Social Security reform

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BY TIM PENNY

This year's election brought significant change to the balance of power in Washington. Some say that Democratic majorities on Capitol Hill spell trouble for President Bush's policy agenda, especially Social Security reform. Thankfully, for the moment, neither Democratic leaders nor the president are reading that interpretation into the election results.

Congressional leaders and the president both seem to understand that the overriding message from the electorate this fall was that voters want an end to partisan bickering and they want results on the major issues facing the nation.

Here is a New Year's resolution for the Democratic Congress and the Bush White House: Make bipartisanship on Social Security the order of the day.

Early signs from Congress are encouraging. Even though many Democrats -- and their associated interest groups -- attacked President Bush on the Social Security issue throughout the recent campaign, the rhetoric since then has been more hopeful. Incoming Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel has acknowledged that all ideas are on the table. In addition, he has begun planning for a committee retreat -- for Democrats and Republicans -- to set an agenda and establish more bipartisanship in the workings of his committee.

Similarly, the new chairmen of the House and Senate Budget Committees -- Representative John Spratt of South Carolina and Sen. Kent Conrad of North Dakota -- are known to be serious about entitlement reform. In addition, the incoming chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Max Baucus of Montana, has a close and constructive working relationship with the ranking Republican, Chuck Grassley of Iowa, who continues to be a proponent of Social Security reform.

Finally, the Blue Dogs -- fiscally conservative Democrats -- will hold the balance of power in the House, while moderate Democrats will also be key players in the Senate, meaning that the majority party will need to keep an eye on the fiscal bottom line, and you cannot do that without addressing entitlements.

From the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue there are also encouraging developments. The White House has evidently anointed Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson to take the lead on Social Security and other entitlement reforms. Paulson is knowledgeable and enthusiastic about this agenda. He is a new face who is trusted by Democrats on the Hill, in no small part because he did not campaign against Democrats in the recent election. Paulson will be joined in this effort by Rob Portman, the president's new budget director. Like Paulson, Portman has the policy expertise and political skills to effectively negotiate with Capitol Hill.

Social Security reform is always a difficult issue. The options for reform are not pain-free. But an increasing number of Democratic legislators are coming to understand that delay is costly -- and unwise. They might want to address the issue now so that it will not await the next president.

President Bush will be looking to his legacy. A domestic policy success, such as securing and strengthening Social Security for coming generations, would fit that bill nicely.

Is this too hopeful a scenario? Maybe. There are lots of reasons to believe that Social Security reform is a stretch too far. The president and Democrats will need to find a way to work together on other issues early next year to set the stage for work on bigger issues such as Social Security.

With a presidential campaign to begin in earnest in January 2008, there may only be a 12-month window for Congress to act before politics again gets in the way.

Still, baby boomers begin retiring in 2008. That means the entitlement fiscal crisis is almost upon us. And history proves that Washington often dithers and dithers -- but then can take action quickly to avert a crisis.

Partisanship and gridlock on the truly important issues such as Social Security are not what voters were endorsing when they voted for divided power in Washington. Now in the New Year, Bush and the Democratic Congress have a chance to show they can fix Social Security in a way that is fair to current retirees and coming generations.

Tim Penny is a former U.S. representative who works with For Our Grandchildren, a bipartisan organization advocating Social Security reform.

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