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With Changes on Capitol Hill, California Is Set to Assert New Clout

By [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 12 — Among the many beneficiaries of last week's seismic power shift in Washington, few states are in the position to reap as much gold as [California](#).

The nation's most populous state has also counted itself among the most marginalized in the Republican era, a place where primary votes in presidential contests happen after the fact, federal dollars do not flow in sufficient amounts and American values are said to go to die.

But with Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#) as the emergent House speaker and several other members of the state's Democratic delegation in line to receive crucial committee positions in the House and the Senate, much of that stands to change.

[Democrats](#) here are positioned to gain serious influence over public policy — and financing — in areas including education, the environment and agriculture. Among other things, they stand to influence the passing of a compromise measure on [immigration](#), of great importance to this heavily farm-dependent state.

Among the legislators who will gain power, many are seasoned former committee leaders who know their way around Washington.

“This election puts California in a strong position offensively and defensively,” said Tim Ransdell, executive director of the California Institute for Federal Policy Research, a bipartisan research group.

“Not only is California now in a stronger position when it wants to seek a formula change, tax break or special project,” Mr. Ransdell said, “the flip side of it is that opportunists from the other 49 states may be less likely to try to pick California's pocket when they are mulling a source of funding for their own pet project.”

In terms of sheer power on Congressional committees, the midterm realignment away from [Republicans](#) dealt California some blows. Representative Jerry Lewis, whose district includes much of San Bernardino County in Southern California, will no longer be

chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. And Representative David Dreier, also of Southern California, will no longer be chairman of the House Rules Committee.

But the losses appear to be more than offset by the rise of Ms. Pelosi, and by the inevitable increase in stature for Senators [Barbara Boxer](#) and [Dianne Feinstein](#), who are neighbors of Ms. Pelosi in the San Francisco Bay Area and stand to gain leadership roles.

“Nancy Pelosi trumps all,” Mr. Ransdell said.

Pure numbers also favor California in the new Congress. In the House, the state’s delegation will comprise 34 Democrats, or more than 15 percent of the Democratic membership, compared with the 20 Republicans representing less than 10 percent of the current Republican membership.

Even some Republicans in California have embraced the new math, including Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#). Mr. Schwarzenegger’s administration is hoping for an unleashing of federal dollars by a Democratic Congress to help pay for prison programs, levee repairs, special education and a host of health entitlement programs, as the governor gears up to make improved health care the centerpiece of his second term.

“We have new people and new ideas coming to Washington,” Mr. Schwarzenegger said on a visit to Mexico this week, adding that he was “very happy” that Ms. Pelosi had been “talking about working together with both parties.”

Finally, there is the Aretha Franklin factor: California has long demanded that the country give it the r-e-s-p-e-c-t it deserves, given its size. At the same time, there is some expectation that California, a wildly diverse, bipartisan, complex state, will be working hard to shed its image as a hotbed of liberal lunacy.

“It is a moment in which California is poised to be better understood,” said Bruce E. Cain, director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the [University of California](#), Berkeley. “To the rest of the country, and inside the Beltway especially, California is viewed through the prism of the recall madness, the anarchy of initiative government and the gay marriage decision. But in reality the state’s politics are centrist, and its politics are hardball.”

Among the Democratic chairmanship positions in the House, Representative George Miller, who represents a district east of San Francisco and is one of three members of the Congressional class of 1974 still serving, is set to become chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, just as the reauthorization of the federal No Child Left Behind Act arises.

[Representative Henry A. Waxman](#) of the Los Angeles area is in line to take over the

Government Reform Committee. Representative Tom Lantos, whose district stretches south of San Francisco, is expected to lead the International Relations Committee. And Representative Bob Filner, whose district includes the southern half of San Diego, is likely to take over the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Several California lawmakers will also assume positions on important subcommittees.

"There is no question that you can do more for your district if you have risen in Congress," said Daniel Weiss, chief of staff to Mr. Miller. "It doesn't translate into dollars per increment of power, but it is better to have more power in Congress than less."

California, like New York, has long lamented that it gets far less in services than it pays the federal government in taxes. State lawmakers and other officials say California gets back 78 cents on each dollar it sends to Washington. Mr. Schwarzenegger, in his first term, vowed to be the "collectinator," squeezing his Republican allies in Congress, but this promise did not come to fruition.

Now, the state hopes to collect. Of urgent interest is California's huge levee system, which drew attention after Hurricane Katrina. The federal government is supposed to pay for 75 percent of the costs to upgrade it, but it has so far given little, and the state is relying on a \$4.1 billion bond act to pay for levee improvements, flood control and flood mapping.

Another area of interest among lawmakers here is the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program, which reimburses states to house felons who are illegal immigrants. During the Clinton administration, the overall appropriation for the program was \$580 million, with most of that going to California, which has a large population of illegal immigrants and overcrowded prisons.

President Bush has routinely cut the program from the federal budget, with Congress then earmarking closer to \$350 million a year. Given that Senator Feinstein was the lawmaker who pushed for the authorization of increased reimbursement, the state is hoping to see more money.

On the health care front, the state is seeking \$72 million in savings on the Medicare drug program.

"Access in D.C. is everything," said Sherry Greenberg, the director of federal relations for the California State Assembly, "and that access has been shut off to us for 12 years. What is going to happen here is that we are at least going to have people willing to listen to us, and to the extent that we can persuade our California members to put forth bills to help us, we can at least have a fighting chance."

There is also a sense among liberal lawmakers, who tend to be the state's most powerful

representatives, that some of the core values of the state, like conservation, will be upheld, often on a national scale, even with a hostile White House.

“There may now be an absence of a negative,” said Philip M. Schiliro, the chief of staff to Mr. Waxman, who cited a bill pending in the Senate that would repeal many food safety rules, undermining California’s stringent law.

Notably, Ms. Boxer is slated to take control of the Environment and Public Works Committee from Senator James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma.

“We will have a voice again on environmental oversight,” said Art Torres, chairman of the California Democratic Party. “Over the last six years, funding has stopped for enforcement of environmental laws, and those issues are important to California.”

If California is dreaming of pork-barrel financing, however, it may be disappointed. Ms. Pelosi has called for cutting back earmarks, and the Democratic Party in general made fiscal restraint a hallmark of its midterm campaign.

“What we ought to do is get the fiscal house in order,” Ms. Feinstein said in an interview. “This party has to show that they can be the fiscally prudent party.”

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