

The New Center

(Washington, DC) — When freshman Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Fla., learned that his voting record in 2007 placed him precisely in the center of the House in National Journal's congressional vote ratings, his initial reaction was laughter.

By Richard E. Cohen and Brian Friel

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(Washington, DC) — When freshman Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Fla., learned that his voting record in 2007 placed him precisely in the center of the House in National Journal's congressional vote ratings, his initial reaction was laughter. "I laughed because of the statistical probability," he said. "I was never a legislator. I was a businessman who gets the facts in the best interests of my district. I don't get caught up in ideology."

Instead, Mahoney explained, he has focused on the diverse needs of his South Florida constituents, including strengthening federal protection of homeowners insurance against hurricanes, developing water-resource projects to clean up the Everglades, and boosting the development of fuels made from sugarcane. "I got elected because people in my district weren't happy with the status quo," said Mahoney, who has been widely described as an "accidental" congressman because he won the seat of Republican Rep. Mark Foley, who resigned shortly before the 2006 election after it was disclosed that he had sent sexually explicit instant messages to congressional pages.

Mahoney said he wasn't familiar with National Journal's vote ratings until he was informed that the results made him the man in the middle of the House's ideological spectrum, with 214 members more conservative than he was, 214 members more liberal than he was, and the rest not receiving scores because of missed votes. His votes for liberal positions on the minimum-wage hike, embryonic-stem-cell research, and Iraq war spending were balanced by his conservative votes on the alternative minimum tax, illegal aliens, and missile defense funds.

Mahoney nevertheless seemed pleased with the outcome. He suggested that he is helping to reshape politics in his bellwether state, which famously split in the 2000 presidential election. "I'm proud as a conservative Democrat to be right in the middle," he said. "My [campaign] opponents are conservative Republicans and out of touch with the district."

Mahoney has plenty of freshman classmates to keep him company at the center, including Rep. Nancy Boyda, D-Kan. She said she viewed her moderate ranking as "third-party validation" of her nonpartisan approach, which, she emphasized, is "not based on ideology or beholden to a party."

"Kansans don't get involved in the politics," Boyda contended. "They want to know how the issues affect them." She is so independent that she has refused to join the House's moderate "Blue Dog" Democrats and has turned down entreaties to participate in party programs to promote her re-election. "I told [House Democratic Caucus Chairman] Rahm [Emanuel] in no uncertain language that I didn't care what he thought about how I should run my campaign," Boyda said. "I told him to leave me alone, and I won't tell him how to run [other] campaigns. After three weeks, he learned to leave me alone."

Boyda's centrism is all the more compelling because she defeated GOP Rep. Jim Ryun, who was the No. 1 most conservative House member in NJ's 2006 vote ratings. Ryun is trying to regain the seat this year, but he faces a primary challenge from a more moderate Republican.

These and other freshman Democrats exemplify the major changes in the House and Senate following the shift in party control brought by the 2006 election. When Republicans held the majorities, the members at the ideological center, not surprisingly, tended to be moderate Republicans who -- despite some grumbling -- usually voted for the agenda set by President Bush and GOP congressional leaders. In those days, the smaller corps of moderate Democrats rarely determined the outcome on major votes.

Those dynamics changed radically last year, particularly in the House. Republicans there displayed intense cohesion and unity: None of them ended up in the liberal half of the chamber in the 2007 vote ratings, and only Reps. Wayne Gilchrest, R-Md., and Christopher Shays, R-Conn., ranked outside the 200 most conservative members. The House's new center filled disproportionately with freshman Democrats, particularly those who won GOP-held seats. They joined more-senior moderate Democrats -- including longtime Blue Dogs and "New Democrats" -- to replace the moderate Republicans who had occupied the center under GOP control.

Of the 10 Democrats, including Mahoney, who hold the slots at the exact center of the House in the 2007 vote ratings, six are first-termers. More broadly, National Journal typically classifies members with average -- or "composite" -- scores in the vote ratings between 35 and 65 on a scale of 100 as "centrists." Nineteen of the 42 House Democratic freshmen qualify as centrists under those standards, as do three of the nine Senate Democratic freshmen. (Click here for a PDF of the congressional centrists.)

Among the Senate centrists was freshman Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., whose overall rating made her only two ticks more liberal than Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., at that chamber's ideological fulcrum. "When you come from a moderate state, being moderate is as natural as brushing your teeth," said McCaskill, who ousted GOP Sen. Jim Talent. "It's the people you represent." Joining McCaskill among the centrists were freshman Sens. Jim Webb, D-Va., and Jon Tester, D-Mont.

National Journal has compiled the congressional vote ratings annually since 1981 under a system designed by William Schneider, a CNN political analyst and commentator, and a contributing editor to the magazine. The ratings are based on key votes -- 107 in the House and 99 in the Senate for 2007 -- that a panel of NJ reporters and editors selected and classified as relating to economic, social, or foreign policy.

Computer-assisted calculations ranked lawmakers on how they voted in each of the three issue areas relative to each other on a conservative-to-liberal scale in both the Senate and the House, and assigned percentile scores. The system also assigns composite scores, which are an average of the members' issue-based scores.

The results show, for example, that on foreign-policy issues, Boyda had a liberal score of 57 and a conservative score of 42. That means that she was more liberal than 57 percent of other members, more conservative than 42 percent, and tied with the rest. The scores do not mean that Boyda voted with the liberals 57 percent of the time, or that she was 57 percent "correct" from a liberal perspective.

Voting Their Districts

While plotting their 2006 election strategy, the Democratic campaign committee chiefs, Emanuel and Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., made a concerted effort to recruit candidates who matched their states and districts, even if their policy positions were not in line with party dogma. Schumer, for example, supported freshman Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., despite his anti-abortion views, because he thought that Casey could defeat GOP Sen. Rick Santorum. Similarly, even though Tester and Webb favor gun rights, heavy support from Schumer's committee helped put them over the top in the election.

Democratic leaders also crafted a modest, middle-of-the-road agenda -- "Six for '06" -- that their party's challengers could embrace, even in Republican strongholds.

The upshot, of course, was the "majority makers," 30 freshman Democrats in the House and six in the Senate who won Republican-held seats. Their victories handed their party control of Capitol Hill, but the newcomers also gave the Democratic caucuses a more moderate hue.

"We bring a healthy attitude to the Democratic Party," Webb said. "People tend to listen to our views." He described many of the freshmen as "economic populists." Asked to define that term, he replied, "You measure the health of a society by how working people are doing, not by what's happening on Wall Street. There are probably six of us out of the nine [freshmen] that were elected together that to varying levels feel strongly about that."

Rep. Jason Altmire, D-Pa., said that the moderate vote-ratings scores for him and other freshmen prove that "we could, for the first time, field candidates who could be competitive in these [Republican] districts. These results show where I want to be: working the middle with both sides." By contrast, Altmire said, he defeated his predecessor, GOP Rep. Melissa Hart, in his suburban Pittsburgh district because "she had moved too far from the center; once her constituents found that out, they kicked her out." Hart is seeking to regain the seat this year.

"I'm a conservative Democrat," explained freshman Rep. Christopher Carney, D-Pa., who represents the northeastern corner of his state. "And that's where our district is -- with family values, people who attend church, and people like me who are gun owners, hunters, and fly fishermen." Carney defeated Republican Rep. Don Sherwood, who faced legal charges that he had abused a woman who claimed to be his mistress.

The vote ratings "show my independence," said freshman Rep. Zack Space, D-Ohio, who succeeded convicted GOP Rep. Bob Ney. "The results don't surprise me. I try very hard to view my voting obligation as a reflection of my constituents.... People in my district don't want to know about liberals and conservatives. They want actions consistent with their values."

Freshman Rep. Ciro Rodriguez, D-Texas, previously represented a mostly urban district centered in San Antonio. But because of redistricting, the seat he captured in his 2006 comeback is radically different and far more conservative, sprawling more than 600 miles from the San Antonio suburbs to the outskirts of El Paso. He now takes more-conservative stances on some issues, such as immigration and gun control, and his vote ratings scores have moved toward the center.

"It's a totally different ball game," Rodriguez said. "Although my basic values haven't changed, what changes is that I am responding to views of different constituents. I have a better appreciation of members who represent swing districts and how the [Democratic] leadership has to deal with those members."

Indeed. As they've settled into their roles on the Hill, the majority makers (and their leaders) have been painfully aware of the need to ensure their political viability -- particularly in the House, where the freshmen face re-election already this fall. They have become prime GOP targets, and their fates will go a long way in determining whether Democrats retain their House majority, and by how much.

The freshmen know that every vote they cast could be used against them on the campaign trail. For the leaders, it's a constant balancing act: seeking to satisfy and help the moderate first-termers politically, while not endangering the party agenda or alienating more-liberal caucus members.

Altmire has not been afraid to disagree with Democratic leaders. "Early this Congress, they would make clear their unhappiness," he said. "Over time, they have decided they can work without us on some votes, and they are comfortable that we know what we are doing."

Likewise, Carney said, "I have no hesitation when I vote against the party view if it conflicts with the values of my district." Space, when asked whether he talks with other freshmen before tough votes, replied, "We don't turn to each other on how to vote but to share information on how we vote," such as constituency-related data.

A look at the voting patterns of the two most conservative freshman Democrats -- Rep. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., and McCaskill -- demonstrates how they and their classmates have given the leaders heartburn. Donnelly sided with conservatives on seven of the 44 economic votes used in NJ's 2007 vote ratings, including his vote against expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program by raising tobacco taxes; that measure, a Democratic leadership priority, passed by 21 votes. Donnelly and five other freshmen were also among the 12 House Democrats who voted against their party's budget resolution last March, allowing the leaders only a narrow 216-210 win for advancing their tax and spending priorities for the coming year.

Immigration and law enforcement votes tilted Donnelly's record on social issues toward the conservative end of the spectrum. He voted with most Republicans and against most Democrats to build additional fencing along the southwest border, a measure that liberals managed to turn back by a close 200-217 vote. Overall in the social category, he voted with conservatives 23 of 35 times. Similarly, Donnelly voted with conservatives 18 of 28 times on foreign policy, largely on defense matters. He voted to fund the Iraq war through the first half of 2008, for example, siding with all but one Republican and with 77 other Democrats, including 15 other freshman Democrats who replaced Republicans.

McCaskill was equally willing to go her own way in the Senate. In the economic category, she voted with conservatives on seven of the 36 votes included in the 2007 ratings. Like Donnelly, McCaskill voted against raising taxes to fund the SCHIP expansion.

On social issues, McCaskill also took conservative stances on immigration, leading her to side with conservatives on 11 of 34 votes. Her vote was decisive on one key matter: She -- along with Webb and Casey -- gave President Bush exactly the 60 votes he needed in August to keep intelligence surveillance powers for six more months, over the objections of most Democrats and of civil-liberties groups. On the war, McCaskill rejected liberal efforts to withdraw troops quickly and to cut off funding. All told, she sided with conservatives on eight of the 29 foreign-policy votes.

Freshman Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., said she thinks her leaders are sympathetic to the first-termers' occasional splits with their party. "I'm sure they understand that we need to keep this district to retain the majority -- and that I won't return unless I vote my constituency," she said.

Giffords predicted that her centrist score in the vote ratings would have a positive effect at home. She recalled serving in the Arizona Legislature, when "we rallied around the scoreboard to see everybody's grades" in interest-group ratings. "My opponents call me a 'Nancy Pelosi liberal,'" she said. "But the electorate understands the facts ... and they want us to get the job done, and on a bipartisan basis."

GOP operatives are skeptical that these Democrats' centrist voting records will give them much electoral protection. For many of the freshman Democrats who represent Republican-leaning districts, "walking the plank for Nancy Pelosi -- even if they don't vote with her 100 percent of the time -- still has very real political consequences," said Ken Spain, a spokesman for the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"It only takes one or two issues to make an election competitive, and so far, a large number of freshman Democrats have provided us with plenty of fodder for the fall," Spain added. In February, for instance, after House Democrats decided to let the intelligence surveillance law expire without passing a new one, the NRCC sent press releases to 20 freshman Democrats' districts arguing that the lawmakers were "playing political chicken with American lives and our country's security."

In a session this week with reporters, NRCC Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., said that even if the freshman Democrats have compiled moderate records, they'll still suffer politically because of what he described as their party's paltry legislative achievements. "Most voters will tell you the country is not better off," Cole said.

Having served three terms before he was defeated in 2004 and then regained his seat in 2006, freshman Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind., is very familiar with Republican campaign tactics. "I wouldn't expect them to say anything else," Hill said. "They will say anything in their ads, as I have learned over the years. I don't respond to their ads, other than to respond with my own ads. My theme is that I am a moderate Democrat, as are most of my constituents."

Class Conflicts And Consensus

The freshman Democratic class of 2006 isn't entirely moderate, of course. Those who won blue districts or states tended to have far more-liberal scores in NJ's vote ratings. Take freshman Rep. Yvette Clarke, D-N.Y., who succeeded retired Democratic Rep. Major Owens in a Brooklyn-based district that gave John Kerry 86 percent of its vote in the 2004 presidential election. She was the 33rd-most-liberal House member in 2007. And freshman Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., who ousted moderate GOP Sen. Lincoln Chafee, was the second-most-liberal senator last year.

Casey noted that the wide-ranging scores of the nine freshman Senate Democrats reflect how different their states are -- from reddish Missouri, Montana, and Virginia, to swing states Ohio and Pennsylvania, to bright blue Rhode Island. "We represent different states and different constituencies," Casey said. "There's a lot of diversity in the class."

Such ideological diversity has made it difficult for the class to find much consensus on policy positions. The single most unifying issue for the freshman Democrats in both chambers has been ethics reform, which is not surprising, given that their party's electoral success resulted in great measure from the GOP's ethics problems. "We want to have a legacy as a class," Altmire told NJ last year. "It won't be on policy grounds, but to have an identity as agents of change who focus on reforms."

Casey agreed. "Ethics is probably the best example of us not just agreeing to come together, but having a real unanimous feeling about it," he said. "I was surprised, frankly, at the camaraderie in the class. I thought everyone would stay in their own lanes, lead their own lives legislatively."

McCaskill, a former state auditor, contended, "My theme song is accountability. My comfort zone is asking questions about the way the money is being spent." The freshmen are not afraid to challenge their party's veterans and push tough ethics changes, she noted. "Some, especially those who came from the House, are much more diplomatic and much more strategic. And some of us have a bad habit of picking up a two-by-four."

--Research associate Peter Bell assisted in compiling this year's vote ratings

