

House Democrats Feel That Nancy Pelosi Has Shamed Them With Her Corruption And Want Her Gone

By JONATHAN MARTIN and ALEXANDER BURNS

312

Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, faces a growing challenge within her party. “I was just in D.C. and that’s the advice everybody gives: Don’t say you’re for Pelosi,” a former Democratic representative said. Erin Schaff for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — A few hours after Conor Lamb, the Pennsylvania Democrat, claimed victory in a House race with a vow to oppose his party’s leader, Nancy Pelosi, the once-and-perhaps-future speaker was explaining to a group of female congressional candidates why she did not retire after 2016.

She intended to do so after Hillary Clinton won, Ms. Pelosi recalled Wednesday at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee reception here. But she stayed to ensure Washington had at least one woman in power.

To some lawmakers in the room who described her remarks, the message was clear: Ms. Pelosi is not going anywhere — a point she underscored in an interview.

Yet her resolve is at odds with growing numbers of Democratic candidates who view her as politically toxic and are pledging to

vote against her as their leader, as Mr. Lamb did without suffering consequences with voters and donors. These candidates and some current House Democrats — tired of years of attack ads invoking Ms. Pelosi as a “San Francisco liberal,” and impatient to see a younger set of leaders take power — are now openly distancing themselves from Ms. Pelosi or declaring outright that it is time for her to go.

Mr. Lamb, by coming out early against Ms. Pelosi and [scoring an upset win in a district President Trump carried by nearly 20 percentage points](#), has clearly emboldened some other Democrats to follow suit and disavow her. Republicans intend to make Ms. Pelosi’s unpopularity a centerpiece of their 2018 strategy, hoping that her polarizing status will mitigate their predicted losses.

Anticipating this strategy from the right, Democratic candidates are increasingly opposing her as speaker or refusing to take a stand an act of political inoculation — a trend that even her allies acknowledge could ultimately imperil her grip on the Democratic caucus.

At least two other senior Democrats, Representatives Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland and Joseph Crowley of New York, are already actively laying the groundwork to seek the leader’s job if Ms. Pelosi’s position becomes untenable.

Get the Morning Briefing by Email

What you need to know to start your day, delivered to your inbox Monday through Friday.

As Democratic House candidates descended on Washington last week for a round of

Enter your email address

You agree to receive occasional updates and special offers for The New York Times's products and services.



[SEE SAMPLE](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)
[OPT OUT OR CONTACT US ANYTIME](#)

training and fund-raising, the topic of how to confront the Pelosi question came up repeatedly, according to multiple officials.

“I was just in D.C. and that’s the

advice everybody gives: Don’t say you’re for Pelosi,” recalled former Representative Brad Ashford, a Nebraska Democrat trying to reclaim his seat. (He would not rule out backing Ms. Pelosi.)

Most ominous for Ms. Pelosi, it is not just centrist candidates running in red-tinged districts who are reluctant to embrace her, but also political insurgents on the left who see her as an embodiment of the Washington establishment.

“I would have to see who’s running,” said Marie Newman, a progressive Democratic House candidate in Illinois, when asked if she would support Ms. Pelosi for speaker. Ms. Newman is vying to unseat Representative Daniel Lipinski, a conservative Chicago Democrat, in a primary there on Tuesday.

And on Capitol Hill, Ms. Pelosi, 77, must contend with colleagues from her own generation who want their turn in charge, as well as younger Democrats who’d prefer to clear out the party’s entire septuagenarian leadership team: beyond Ms. Pelosi, the other two ranking House Democrats, Mr. Hoyer and James E. Clyburn, are 78 and 77.

Yet at a time when women are at the forefront of the opposition to Mr. Trump's presidency — [volunteering, donating and running for office in record numbers](#) — the specter of Democrats taking back the House only to unceremoniously dump the most powerful woman in American politics strikes many in the party as outrageous.

And Ms. Pelosi herself is plainly in this camp.

"I'm a woman at the table," she said in the interview Friday before getting on a plane for Houston, where she was going to raise money for House Democrats at the annual rodeo there.

Representative Joseph Crowley of New York with Representative Linda T. Sánchez of California, a fellow Democrat. Mr. Crowley is seen as planning a challenge to Ms. Pelosi if her position becomes untenable. Alex Wong/Getty Images

Demonstrating the swagger that delights her admirers and prompts eye-rolling from detractors, Ms. Pelosi said Democrats needed her in charge.

"I am a master legislator, I am a shrewd politician and I have a following in the country that, apart from a presidential candidate, nobody else can claim," she said.

While she would not firmly commit to seeking the speakership again, it is clearly her plan, and she even gave voice to a concern on the minds of many Democrats: the chaotic scramble that would ensue if she steps down.

“If I was to walk away now, this caucus would be in such a musical chairs scenario,” she said.

Even as energy on the left has soared across the country thanks to Mr. Trump, tensions among House Democrats are brewing inside the Capitol. Should Democrats fail to reclaim the House in a year with so many factors in their favor, Ms. Pelosi and her long-serving lieutenants will almost certainly be pushed to step down.

Yet some in the caucus want to see new leadership no matter what. Representative Bill Pascrell Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, hosted Mr. Crowley at a St. Patrick’s Day-themed event last week and unexpectedly announced that he would back Mr. Crowley for leader. Mr. Pascrell, 81, said the culture of the House was changing.

“A lot of new people will be coming in and I think we should start fresh,” Mr. Pascrell said, adding almost apologetically of Ms. Pelosi: “She’s taken a lot of crap from Republicans and Democrats and she’s really been above it all.”

Representative Filemon Vela, a Texas Democrat, said he had also encouraged Mr. Crowley to run for speaker.

Lawmakers say Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland has pitched himself as a steady Democratic leader through the 2020 elections.

Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

“Having Joe be the leader of this party next session would be a welcome change,” said Mr. Vela, 55, adding that Ms. Pelosi “hurts our candidates” in competitive districts.

For his part, Mr. Crowley has been inviting groups of younger lawmakers to meet for coffee and pastries in his office, reaching out to high-profile newer members like Joaquin Castro of Texas and Joseph P. Kennedy III of Massachusetts.

In an interview, Mr. Crowley declined to rule out taking on Ms. Pelosi. Asked if he was seeking commitments for a future race, Mr. Crowley said only that “I have been talking to my colleagues about what they and we can do to help put us in the majority.”

Ms. Pelosi dismissed the idea of a challenge from Mr. Crowley, who briefly considered challenging her after the 2016 election, and her aides pointedly noted that at an event in New York last week, he introduced her as “soon to be speaker again.”

Mr. Hoyer, in turn, has pitched himself to colleagues as a transitional House speaker, according to multiple lawmakers who have spoken with him — a steady hand through the 2020 elections, and perhaps no further. Katie Grant, his spokeswoman, said he was “focused on taking back the House.”

Part of Ms. Pelosi’s challenge owes to the changing nature of fund-raising: Mr. Lamb raised over \$4 million from mostly online contributors, the same way other Democrats are attracting donations. That has raised questions about just how much Ms. Pelosi’s vaunted fund-raising prowess still matters.

“It weakens the leverage of party leaders,” Representative Tim Ryan, an Ohio Democrat who challenged Ms. Pelosi after the

2016 elections, said of the new fund-raising tools.

Asked if she would support Ms. Pelosi for speaker, Marie Newman, a progressive Democratic House candidate in Illinois, said, “I would have to see who’s running.”

Sara Burnett/Associated Press

Yet some Democrats predicted that if the party rides an electoral wave back to power, Ms. Pelosi would reap much of the credit.

“If we take the majority, I completely assume that Leader Pelosi will be Speaker Pelosi,” said Representative Karen Bass, Democrat of California.

The most plausible scenario for Ms. Pelosi to exit, Democrats believe, is one in which the party just barely wins control of the House. A number of new lawmakers would have pledged not to vote for her, and several Democrats oppose her as a matter of routine, potentially denying her the 218 votes needed to secure the speakership.

“I think it will be left up to the new membership,” said Representative John Lewis of Georgia, noting that freshman lawmakers and the rest of the caucus should “work their will.” That could doom Ms. Pelosi, especially if more Democrats follow Mr. Lamb’s approach.

At least three of the Democrats’ “red to blue” candidates — recruits designated as top priorities by the D.C.C.C. — have

signaled they would prefer a leader other than Ms. Pelosi. In Minnesota, Dean Phillips, a wealthy businessman challenging Representative Erik Paulsen, a Republican, has called for a “new generation of leadership.” In Washington State, Lisa Brown, a former state senator who is challenging Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a member of the Republican leadership, said “there’s room for new blood in all the caucuses in Congress.”

And Paul Davis, who is running for an open seat in Kansas, is flatly opposed to Ms. Pelosi. He said a change was “badly needed” and lamented leaders who are “toxic in this part of the country.”

But there is unease with Ms. Pelosi in solid-blue districts, too. In two Boston-area districts, neither the Democratic incumbents nor their more progressive rivals have committed to backing Ms. Pelosi. Brianna Wu, a liberal activist opposing Representative Stephen F. Lynch in a Democratic primary, said she was worried Democrats would suffer from Ms. Pelosi’s “inability to express a vision for the party.”

Representative Kurt Schrader of Oregon, a moderate Democrat, said he had encouraged other congressional hopefuls to oppose Ms. Pelosi if necessary.

312
COMMENTS

“I have liberals back home, the one thing they really like about me is the fact that I voted against Nancy,” he said. “No matter what candidate you are, it’s not necessarily a bad message.”

Jonathan Martin reported from Washington, and Alexander Burns from New York.