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On this, Dems are more conservative than GOP

- *Joshua Spivak: Challenge to Nancy Pelosi's Minority Leader bid is a new twist for Democrats*
- *Unlike Republicans, Democrats traditionally stick with their leaders even in hard times, he says*

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Following a disappointing showing on Election Day, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is facing a revolt brewing from the Democratic Party's backbench. Congressman Tim Ryan, a moderate from Ohio, is challenging Pelosi for the Minority Leader job.

For the Republicans, a leadership challenge like this would be nothing new — the party's caucus has long seemed to treat their leadership as a target (or, at the very least, expendable). But for the Democrats, the emerging contest between Pelosi and Ryan may indicate a new, highly disruptive way of managing their House team.

Tim Ryan's district is located in the economically unsettled Midwest region that cost Hillary Clinton and the Democrats the election. Ryan has been part of the disappearing moderates in Congress, as he at one point earned an "A" rating from the NRA and once had a more pro-life stance.

His focus in the speaker's race has been on the Democrats' failure to win over blue-collar workers in the Midwest on economic issues. Just by running, Ryan presents a stark contrast to the San Francisco-based Pelosi.

Based on Republicans' lack of hesitation to challenge or oust their own leaders, it may seem like leadership challenges are a regular feature of congressional life. Speaker Paul Ryan was facing a potential revolt from the right before Trump's surprising victory. His predecessor, John Boehner, resigned rather than face a potential challenge, as did former Speaker Newt Gingrich, who stepped down after a bad showing in the 1998 election.

Minority leaders also have faced the ax from the Republican rank and file. Gingrich himself let the previous minority leader, Robert Michel, know he would be challenged for the leadership post in 1994, while Michel's predecessor, John Rhodes, faced similar threats. Before that, Charles Halleck was tossed out by a revolt led by Gerald Ford. Halleck himself led a successful uprising against then-Minority Leader Joe Martin (the last man to serve as Republican speaker before Gingrich four decades later).

But Democrats in Congress behave very differently. Despite being out of power in the House for all but four of the last 22 years, the Democrats have not kicked out any of their leaders. While Speaker Jim Wright resigned in 1989 due to scandal, no other Democratic speaker or leader (either majority or minority) has been removed by the party or left early.

After losing control in the House in 2010, Nancy Pelosi stayed atop the caucus as the Minority Leader. Her predecessor, Dick Gephardt, maintained his job despite continual failed elections. The same thing happened during Democratic losses of control in 1946 and 1952, with Sam Rayburn sliding from Speaker to Minority Leader.

Even challenges are rare. The Democratic leadership position is so set in stone that incumbent party bosses rarely ever face a challenge — the exception being in 1968, when Speaker John McCormack easily beat back a challenge to his role by Congressman Mo Udall.

The Democrats also have kept up a strict line of succession, whereby the majority leader or minority leader would automatically step up to the speakership. In 13 consecutive leadership changes, the speaker had previously been either majority or minority leader (or minority whip, the second-highest ranking position on the minority side).

This policy only ended when the Republicans returned to power and demonstrated their enduring willingness to dip down into the ranks — witness Paul Ryan, Dennis Hastert or the aborted choice of Robert Livingston — to select a speaker.

If Pelosi is tossed out, Democrats may be facing a similar pattern. The Democratic rank and file may no longer be interested in maintaining a structure that has been unable to get them back into power. Instead, they may start looking for new options and be quick with the hook if the party fails to successfully regain control, or as in the case with recent Republicans, doesn't present a strong enough opposition to the president's agenda.

Nancy Pelosi has managed to hold on to power, despite the House Democrats being lost in the political wilderness. Even if she survives Ryan's challenge, future Democratic leaders may no longer be able to maintain their grip on the party's top spots in the face of electoral failure.

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