



## New Congress poses new challenge for NCLB

### *Bush, Democrats could have short window to reauthorize law*

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The reauthorization of the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) is one of the few legislative objectives Hill observers say **President Bush** could reasonably expect to accomplish with the new Democratic-led Congress.

His chances are helped by the fact that the incoming Democratic chairs of the education committees -- Sen. **Edward Kennedy**, D-Mass., and Rep. **George Miller**, D-Calif., -- are adamant supporters of the law, particularly its goals of holding schools to greater accountability and giving every child a quality education.

Even so, the political dynamics of the post-midterm elections are far different than the atmosphere of just a month ago. Not only does Bush have much less support for policy initiatives from Congress as a whole than he did at the start of his first term in 2001, he lacks backing from his own party.

Several conservative Republicans say they supported the initial reforms in 2001 to give their new president a legislative victory. They now view NCLB as a major federal intrusion on state and local control. Furthermore, with the exception of an electoral win by Rep. **Mike Castle**, R-Del., the midterm elections virtually wiped out the [Main Street Partnership](#) Republicans, an influential caucus of moderates.

That means Democrats have even more control over the reauthorization than election observers initially predicted.

### **New voices, new demands**

However, the incoming Democrats also pose a challenge for completing the reauthorization. Though a majority of the 39 incoming Democrats -- a figure that doesn't include eight still undecided races -- are considered to be pragmatic, "can-do" centrists, they also lack an understanding of the merits of NCLB, observers say.

Moreover, they have heard more about the law's faults than its successes from local school teachers and administrators.

"They are going to be coming into Congress saying 'we want changes,'" said **Jack Jennings**, president of the [Center on Education Policy](#). That means leaders will have to spend much of their time briefing new members about the law, particularly its overarching goal of providing equitable educational services to all students.

The task won't be an easy one, Jennings added. "The leaders are going to have to argue for refining NCLB, rather than eliminating it."

Considering all the factors, former Gov. **Bob Wise**, president of the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#), predicted that the combination of the lackluster Republican sentiment over NCLB and skepticism about the law by Democrats will prove to be a "volatile mix."

## **A window of opportunity**

Meanwhile, leaders from both sides of the political fence continued to promise to reach across the aisle next year in a spirit of bipartisanship. "We think that's what the American people want us to do, and that's what we intend to do," House Democratic Whip **Steny Hoyer** told reporters Tuesday.

Some Hill analysts say the new Congress will have only six to nine months to produce legislation before the partisan nature of the 2008 presidential elections supersedes all policy decisions. Others say the newly-proclaimed cooperative spirit will end much sooner.

"The bipartisanship everyone is talking about is going to last at least another half hour," predicted **Brookings Institution's Ron Haskins**.

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