

## Florida political muscle grows in Congress

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For a state of its size, Florida has not wielded considerable clout on Capitol Hill in years. But that's about to change: Republican control of the U.S. House in January will boost the state's influence, with three Floridians chairing three key committees.

Miami's Ileana Ros-Lehtinen will chair Foreign Affairs, Orlando's John Mica will head the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and the Panhandle's Jeff Miller will chair the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

The delegation's dean, St. Petersburg Republican Bill Young, is likely to once again chair the powerful defense appropriations subcommittee that has doled out tens of millions of dollars to state military installations, and Miami Republican Mario Diaz-Balart and Sarasota's Vern Buchanan have been appointed to seats on key budget and tax writing committees -- Appropriations, and Ways and Means, respectively.

Also, incoming Sen. Marco Rubio is already a rising star -- tapped to second the nomination of Sen. Mitch McConnell for minority leader.

Republicans say the country's fourth-biggest state will have the ear of leadership and access to the power circle -- the extent to which Florida hasn't seen since the 1980s. That was when senior Democratic congressmen such as Claude Pepper, Dante Fascell and William Lehman chaired major committees, put their stamp on legislation and steered money home.

"The chairs are all at the leadership table with the speaker on a very regular basis," said Miller, whose committee oversees the Department of Veterans Affairs and its \$119 billion budget. "It gives Florida an opportunity to have a major voice in many of the issues that will be coming before the 112th Congress."

### LESS PORK?

But unlike past years when clout often translated into pork sent back home, Republicans face a new political reality: They are coming into power during a wave of voter discontent, and may be forced to scrap funding for hometown projects as they seek to downsize government and rein in federal spending.

"That Brinks truck is going to be more like a Brinks Volkswagen," suggested Bob Burluson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders' Association, which nevertheless hailed Mica's ascension to the committee that will write a national blueprint for transportation spending.

"There just isn't that much money, but we certainly at least will get our fair share of what little money there is to hand out."

Diaz-Balart, who acknowledged his committee was once the prime ladler of pork, said it's now charged with "bringing sanity to our fiscal house, to our fiscal situation."

Even without the largess, he expects benefits to the state by having members in powerful positions.

"We've got Florida people in key positions when the key decisions are being made," Diaz-Balart said.

Mica said he's cognizant of the pitfalls of parochialism and determined to avoid it: The Alaskan bridge-to-nowhere that came to symbolize the excess of earmarking was championed in 2005 by Alaska Republican Don Young when he chaired the transportation committee.

"I've told people I don't want to be in the same mold as others who have taken extra advantage of the position," Mica said. "I think mood of the public is such that they want their money well spent on projects that create jobs and expand the economy even as we do more with less."

Still, Mica, who has ties to Miami and has toured the area during rush hour with Diaz-Balart, said he's eager to see a number of Florida projects get off the ground. "Some have already started and I will be in a position to nudge them along," he said, adding, "I've got an eye on Florida, but I can also take you through the rest of the country."

One priority, he said, improving rail service along the busy and congested Boston to Washington corridor.

## **A CONCERN**

Broward Democrat Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who will lose her post as chair of the appropriations subcommittee that oversees the legislative branch, agreed that the GOP clout could benefit the state. But she noted that a top Republican leader has suggested a priority will be ensuring that President Barack Obama serves just one term.

"It's a good thing that Florida has some veterans chairing committees, however I'm gravely concerned about the direction they're going to take this country," said Wasserman Schultz who was promoted to vice chair of the Democrats' Steering and Policy Committee and will serve as a chief deputy whip. "If all you're doing is holding oversight hearings and your priority, like [Senate Minority Leader] Mitch McConnell is to defeat President Obama, that's not going to be productive for the state of Florida. Having power is important but it matters what you do with it."

All three committee chairs said oversight and trimming costs will be priorities: Ros-Lehtinen has already identified "a number of cuts" to the State Department and foreign aid budgets she'd like to make. Diaz-Balart said he's hoping to land a slot on the appropriations subcommittee that oversees the State Department and foreign operations. And Miller said he wants to beef up the committee's oversight operations -- including looking into problems with improperly sterilized medical equipment at veterans' hospitals, including Miami's.

But the committees themselves may be smaller: Incoming House Speaker John Boehner said in an interview to be aired Sunday on *60 Minutes* that one of the House's first votes will be to cut congressional budgets, including his own, by 5 percent.

Florida's status as a presidential swing state for both parties is likely to continue to bolster its profile -- as evidenced by this week's Transportation Department announcement. Agency officials said Thursday they are giving Florida more than \$300 million for a bullet train.

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