



Image from: [Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to serve as Speaker... in The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History](#)

Summary Article: **Pelosi, Nancy**

From *American Government A to Z: Congress A to Z*

A major event in House history occurred in 2007 when California Democrat Nancy Pelosi (1940–) was elevated to Speaker, becoming the highest-ranking woman ever elected in the U.S. government. As Speaker, Pelosi was second in line for the presidency, after the vice president. Earlier, in 2003, she became the first woman to serve as a party leader in either chamber when she was elected House minority leader at the beginning of the 108th Congress.

Pelosi learned politics from her father, Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., a New Deal-era House member who went on to be Baltimore mayor. In the working-class enclave near downtown called Little Italy, the D'Alesandro rowhouse on Albemarle Street was open to people who needed food, some wood for heat, or a job on the city payroll. With her five brothers, "Little Nancy" took turns at the desk near the door, keeping a "favor file" to be consulted at reelection time. Copies of the daily *Congressional Record* were stacked beneath her bed. Pelosi's mother, Annunciata, balanced caring for the kids with political organizing, a model her daughter would adopt.

Pelosi graduated from Trinity College, an all-female Catholic school in Washington, D.C., and worked briefly in 1963 as a receptionist for Sen. Daniel B. Brewster of Maryland before leaving the job after a few months to marry college sweetheart Paul Pelosi. The couple moved to his native San Francisco, where he became a successful investment banker and she became a stay-at-home mother of five, albeit a wealthy one with live-in help.

Even as a full-time mother, Pelosi was honing political skills. She developed into an impressive Democratic fundraiser by keeping lists, memorizing names and faces, and meticulously hand-writing thank you notes to donors. Her five children served food at political events, stuffed envelopes, and canvassed door-to-door as soon as they could walk. In the 1980s Pelosi rose to chair the California Democratic Party. But she waited until she was forty-seven, and her youngest was in high school, to run for office herself. When San Francisco's main House seat came open with the death of Democrat Sala Burton, Pelosi used her insider's contacts to capture the nomination, which was tantamount to election in one of the nation's most Democratic districts. She won reelection easily after that.

CLOSER LOOK





Nancy Pelosi

Source: AP Images

In 2007 after the Democrats returned to majority in the House, the Speakership went to Nancy Pelosi of California. As Speaker, Pelosi became the highest-ranking woman ever in U.S. government and second in line for the presidency, after the vice president.

Pelosi's congressional career up the ladder took a key step in 2001 when she was elected party whip over Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, 118–95. From 2003 to 2007 she served as minority leader, building support among the Democratic troops by giving favors to allies and allowing junior members new opportunities, especially on committees. She was especially interested in broadening the party's structure in the House to open doors for more women, Hispanics, African Americans, and—significantly—party moderates. The latter was noteworthy because of her reputation—encouraged at every turn by Republicans—that she was an old-time liberal. She was, in fact, from the liberal wing of the party—once joining the Progressive Caucus, which she left as she became a party leader—and her home of San Francisco was one of most left-leaning jurisdictions in the nation.

But even though her personal politics matched the reputation, in her leadership activities she more resembled a ward boss, an approach she got from her father, who maintained power as Baltimore mayor with an old-fashioned system of favors and patronage jobs. As the 2006 elections approached, Pelosi worked tirelessly, flying to several cities in a week and ultimately raising \$50 million.

Republicans already knew that Pelosi was a tough opponent, in spite of her ready smile and studied graciousness. She possessed a steely determination, demanded discipline from the ranks, and punished those who crossed her. Should a member resist her entreaties on a difficult vote with the common plea, "I'm sorry, but I can't be with you this time," Pelosi's response typically was, "Then we can't be with you." During her triumphant march to deliver a Democratic majority control of the House in 2006, she told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I'm fighting a battle here. I'm not getting my hair done."

Her demands for loyalty sometimes backfired, most notably after the 2006 elections in a contest for majority leader between Hoyer, the minority whip who had earned the respect of many Democrats with his hard work and generous fundraising during the campaign to win the House, and a long-time ally of Pelosi, John P. Murtha of Pennsylvania. She made it clear Murtha was her choice, but Hoyer already had lined up the votes and won easily, 149–86. Pelosi congratulated him and declared, "Let the healing begin."

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In 2007 Pelosi moved swiftly to set a House agenda reflecting the new Democratic majority. She launched a “first 100 hours” of legislation that focused on long-held party goals: an increase in the federal minimum wage; a cut in student loan rates to make college more affordable; authority for the government to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies for Medicare prescription drug discounts; and implementation of many recommendations from a commission that studied the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a report that Republicans had ignored. Many of the items on the “first 100 hours” agenda quickly passed the House, although far fewer had passed the Senate by the end of the year.

The most notable achievement of her first year, the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007 raising the minimum wage, was signed into law by President Bush in May. By the end of 2007, she had received good reviews for her control over the party hierarchy and the powerful committee chairs. Her most daunting challenge continued to be uniting her party, with its diverse views about U.S. involvement in Iraq, into strong Democratic opposition to the president’s management of the war there.

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