

VILLAGE CARE PUBLIC POLICY OBSERVER

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What's next for the New Republican Majority?

The opening day of the NYS legislative session on January 7, 2015 started off in a fairly festive atmosphere, with Senators rubbing shoulder-to-shoulder in the packed chamber waiting for their turn to be sworn in. Many Senators brought their loved ones onto the chamber floor to be photographed together being sworn in, all smiles and happy to start a new session. And then the chamber got down to business.

One of the first orders of business in the beginning of any new legislative session across parliamentary bodies all over the nation, once the introductory prayer and pledge of allegiance are completed, is a vote for the chamber's leadership. Once that is done, most legislatures then must vote on a basic rules package. While considered fairly mundane, the details of these packages are critical to the running of a parliamentary body. They decide who controls the chamber, who decides how bills are brought forth for a vote, how bills are referred to committees, the rule governing debates as well as floor time and how resources between parties are divided. In most cases the vote for a rules package is considered routine, and it is widely understood in chambers across the country that the majority party gets to determine much of how the rules package is created.

Senator Kemp Hannon introduced what many expected to be a routine vote on a rules package. Instead, he was immediately challenged by Senator Daniel Squadron on the content of various components of the package. Senator Squadron challenged why all three conferences (Republican, Democrat and Independent Democratic Caucus) would not have some measure of equal say in how bills move through the Senate chamber. This was then lead by challenges from Senator Liz Krueger about the allocation of resources between the majority and minority parties, articulating that the Democrats get a far smaller percentage of the overall financial resources devoted the chamber than their numbers would suggest.

Ironically, the caucus with the biggest to lose in this new rules package is the Independent Democratic Caucus (IDC). Per the new rules package, Senator Dean Skelos will now have sole authority to move legislation through the chamber, whereas in the 2013-2014 session this was agreed to through a power-sharing agreement between the Republicans and the IDC. With the Republicans having a clear majority in the chamber, there no longer is a need for them to share power.

This lively debate about the rules package continued for quite some time. In all fairness to the Republican party, when the Democrats were in control, the same set of rules were applied that were now being challenged with them in the minority. Each party, when they control the chamber, generally applies the same set of rules that were the subject of debate on the first day of session. But regardless of the challenges raised by Democrats, in the end the rules package was adopted by a voice vote.



It's hard to read the tea leaves and make a conclusion about what this signals for the coming legislative session, but it does appear that on first look, the Democrats and Republicans have already started off with what promises to be a lively session with the minority party ready to challenge the majority party at every opportunity.

Normally this same date would also be the Governor's State of the State address. With the passing of former Governor Mario Cuomo and the funeral having taken place the very day before, Governor Andrew Cuomo has rescheduled the State of the State address for January 21st. As reported by the NY Daily News, the Governor is expected to deliver a budget address combined with the State of the State address on the 21st. Since the two addresses are normally on separate occasions, it is expected that the usual budget jockeying will take place earlier than in previous years

Long Awaited Municipal ID Card Becomes a Reality

With much fanfare and eager anticipation by the immigrant community, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that New York City is now issuing NYC municipal identification cards to all NYC residents over 14 years of age. As promised, this ID card will be accepted by many banks and city agencies. While designed in part to encourage undocumented immigrants in the city to possess proper identification, it also contains perks to encourage the average New Yorkers to get this ID, known as IDNYC. Card holders will get free access to City zoos, cultural institutions and botanical gardens, 20% discounts at the YMCA, 30-day free trial at NYSC, will be a city-wide pass to 83 tourist attractions, among other benefits.

Many social services organizations, including VillageCare, had publicly supported the issuance of IDNYC, providing benefits to homeless New Yorkers, many of whom struggle with inadequate identification, and the city's immigrant communities. This card is modeled after the widely touted San Francisco municipal identification card.

On the first day of issuance many centers experienced long lines and wait times, promising what may be a very popular product issued by the City of New York.

Up on the Hill: Washington Report

The new Republican majority in the United States Senate, along with their counterparts in the U.S. House of Representatives, wasted no time in the first days of session drawing contrasts between their priorities and the White House.

The U.S. Senate is moving ahead rapidly with legislation that would force approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline, proceeding with a cloture vote to force an end to debate in an attempt to move the bill forward. Backers believe that enough Democrats will cross the aisle to garner 60 votes needed to break a filibuster on this bill. If this happens, it will be proceeded by several days (or weeks) of debate with an eventual vote that would undoubtedly pass, followed swiftly by House action and on to the President.

At the same time, the House is proceeding with a veto to compel an end to President Obama's policy of halting some types of deportations, which has been widely praised by immigration advocates but is seen as overreaching by Republicans. This language will most likely pass the House of Representatives, but may very well become stalled in the U.S. Senate with Democrats guaranteed to filibuster any attempts to override the President's new immigration policy. The White House has promised a veto on both bills and there should be insufficient votes for an override, should it come to that.

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