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House Republicans wield the power of committees

By Joseph Picard

To the victor go the spoils. The GOP retook the House of Representatives in the November elections and, on Wednesday, they will officially take control, with each House member - all 242 Republicans and 193 Democrats -- taking the oath of office and Rep. John Boehner, R-OH, being sworn in as Speaker.

More significantly, Republican lawmakers will now head up every House committee, bumping Democrats to "ranking member" - which is to say, minority - status.

The committee system is how the House does the people's business. Committees study proposals for potential laws. The proposals, or bills, reach the committees through members of Congress, who draw them up in response to, presumably, some pressing issue, which they have learned about from constituents, or lobbyists, or colleagues, or the Administration, or the media, or some other source.

Committees also look into pressing issues that may not as yet have engendered a bill, but have reached lawmakers' ears through public outcry.

Moreover, committees investigate matters that arise from laws already passed, whether the matter is the value of the law itself, a violation of the law or government regulations or conduct based on the law.

Committees are powerful. They can move legislation to the full House for a vote. They can condemn proposals to the dustbin by rejecting them outright or postponing consideration indefinitely. Committees can also issue subpoenas to anyone to testify before the committee, and that person risks legal prosecution for ignoring or refusing the summons.

House Republican leaders are poised to take advantage of all these powers to advance their agenda for the nation and, politically, for the furtherance of the Republican Party. The new line-up for House Committees chairs is:

Agriculture: Frank Lucas, R-OK
Appropriations: Harold 'Hal' Rogers, R-KY
Armed Services: Buck McKeon, R-CA
Budget: Paul Ryan, R-WI
Education and Labor: John Kline, R-MN
Energy and Commerce: Fred Upton, R-MI
Financial Services: Spencer Bachus, R-AL
Foreign Affairs: Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-FL
Homeland Security: Peter King, R-NY
Judiciary: Lamar Smith, R-TX
Natural Resources: Doc Hastings, R-WA
Oversight and Government Reform: Darrell Issa, R-CA
Science and Technology: Ralph Hall, R-TX
Small Business: Sam Graves, R-MO
Transportation and Infrastructure: John Mica, R-FL
Veterans' Affairs: Jeff Miller, R-FL
Ways and Means: David Camp, R-MI

"There is going to be a lot of investigations by House Committees in this

Congress," said Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

But Tanner said the likely probes into policy decisions by the Obama administration will try to steer clear of investigations that appear to be "witch hunts" or motivated by political vendetta.

"I don't think you are going to see Darrell Issa looking for Obama's birth certificate, or investigations of that nature," Tanner said.

Issa's Oversight Committee does have wide parameters and can open investigations into just about any federal government activity. Issa today announced on Twitter that he planned to look at, among other things, mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, Wikileaks, corruption in Afghanistan, and the "impact of government hyperregulation on job creation."

Tanner said the danger for Republicans, in aggressively pursuing investigations into the administration, is that public perception may see the GOP as going after Obama for political reasons, and that perception could jeopardize the good standing the party now has among voters.

"Going after Obama could backfire on them," Tanner said. "Republicans remember what happened with Bill Clinton. People began to see him as a victim of the Republicans and that helped Clinton. They don't want to repeat that mistake with Obama."

Tanner said that the administration's healthcare reform will be the prime target of House committee probes.

"You will see everyone that had anything to do with healthcare reform hauled before House committees to testify," Tanner said.

Tanner said Dr. Donald Berwick, the head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, is one administrator who will probably be spending a lot of time before House investigatory panels, both because he was appointed by Obama during a recess, so that he did not have to face a pre-appointment grilling by lawmakers, and because he favors some approaches to healthcare considered radical by the GOP.

"You will see a fight about healthcare reform every day," Tanner said.

Rep. Fred Upton, R-MI, who will head the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, has pledged to go after "Obamacare" and thinks the House can actually muster enough votes for a repeal to override a Presidential veto.

Any repeals, or other legislation, the Republican-controlled House puts forth, the Democrat-controlled Senate can quash and the President can veto.

Committees are comprised of subcommittees, some of which are quite powerful. One to watch is the House Subcommittee on Domestic Monetary Policy, which will be chaired by Rep. Ron Paul, R-TX, one of the most independent lawmakers in Congress, father of incoming freshman Sen. Rand Paul, R-KY, and an outspoken critic of the Federal Reserve, which is the institution that Paul's subcommittee is charged with monitoring. Paul has spoken publicly of auditing the Fed and even of abolishing it.