

NationalJournal

The Proxy Fight for the Future of House Democrats

The contest between Cheri Bustos and David Cicilline for assistant Democratic leader will reveal much about which way the party is headed.

**Daniel Newhauser**

🕒 Oct. 26, 2018, 7:50 a.m.

HARRISBURG, Pa.—The position was created as almost an afterthought, but now, eight years later, the race for assistant House Democratic leader is shaping up as a proxy battle for the future of the party and a referendum on its current leader.

In 2010, after House Democrats were whittled to their smallest minority since 1948, Leader Nancy Pelosi created the post to give Rep. James Clyburn, who had served as majority whip, a soft landing spot—and to [defuse a potential fight](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/13/AR2010111302672.html?tid=a_inl_manual) between Clyburn and Rep. Steny Hoyer for the No. 2 leadership job. Over the years, as Hoyer and Clyburn stayed in place below her, Pelosi has hung on to power and any other potential challengers have either left the House or worked under her lead.

This year, though, she may face her toughest challenge yet, as dozens of Democratic candidates have pledged to support a leadership change, and she has for seemingly the first time begun [acknowledging a future without her](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/22/there-has-be-transition-some-point-pelosi-says-about-democratic-leadership/) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/22/there-has-be-transition-some-point-pelosi-says-about-democratic-leadership/). If the dominoes fall in just the right way, the assistant leader position may be the proving ground for a leader who will usurp her.

Running for the post are Reps. Cheri Bustos and David Cicilline. The former is a moderate journalist-turned-corporate-communicator-turned-congresswoman who has held on to a Trump-loving Illinois district for three terms; the latter was the first openly gay mayor of a state capital (Providence, Rhode Island) before joining Congress as a dyed-in-the-wool progressive and becoming the first openly gay elected congressional leader. Both cochair the Democratic Policy and Communications Committee—another institution

created by Pelosi to give a friendly rival a soft landing before it was transitioned into a group with three elected cochairs in an attempt to pacify caucus angst

Though it is apparent only when reading between the lines, this race is at once bolstered by the caucus's frustration with Pelosi's historic stay in power and weighted with expectations that one of the two candidates could soon be House speaker.

Compounding the pressure is that the position is [so inchoate](#)

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clyburns-leadership-role-a-work-in-progress/2011/05/09/AFYHoWbG_story.html?utm_term=.36acoc6d79bd).

Unlike whip or caucus chair or majority leader, there has never been a race for assistant leader and there is really no road map for what an assistant leader does. As a consequence, the candidates have been advancing expansive and intriguing visions for the post that conveniently double as blueprints for the future of the party—not to mention subtle rebukes of Pelosi's reign.

A “flawed brand”

Recently, Bustos sat with me at a Harrisburg diner, where she came to stump for Democratic candidate George Scott. I suggested that the post for which she is vying would be the highest ranking Democratic leadership position not occupied by a septuagenarian. If Pelosi is cast off, Democrats may not want to replace her with her age-equal underlings, Minority Whip Steny Hoyer or Assistant Leader Jim Clyburn, making this race a natural stepping stone to the top.

“Boy you're smart,” she said, through laughter.

“This will be the will of the caucus and ... it will be a numbers game. You've got to get to 218 [votes to be speaker] and [Pelosi] knows how to count. So I think she'll figure that out, whether she can get to 218 or not,” she added. “On

Nov. 7 we'll all wake up and figure out what has to happen and it's not clear to me how that's going to look right now."

Bustos's vision runs through districts like hers and Scott's, which were won by President Trump, but which she believes are populated by "Trump triers"—people willing to take a chance on Trump but who can be brought back into the Democratic fold.

"I think we need to rebrand our party. I think our party's got a flawed brand in this part of the country," she said.

She believes these purple districts are the key to the majority and wants her role to be that of an incumbent protector for swing districts, giving members a road map for how to win, including how to message, how to send news releases, what their first bill should be, and what to do during district work periods.

"My vision for assistant Democratic leader is that we structure that entire office for these new members of Congress who are coming from districts George will be coming from," Bustos said. "Everything I do, it works in the Trump district I'm from and I don't consider any of it proprietary. I will literally say, 'Here's what we do. It's been effective. Please take it, run with it.'"

Scott, who was lunching with us, perked up. Though this was the first day Bustos and Scott had met, he said that when he first considered running, he found an article about her path to victory.

"I sent it to anyone who worked with me. I said 'This is the model.' So a big part of the credit, although she doesn't know it, is the model that she came up with in Illinois," Scott said. "To hear her talk about all the things that are concerns in the back of my mind, knowing that I'm going to need to address them starting on Nov. 7, that's very relieving. That's very comforting."

I suggested that her vision is reminiscent of another prominent Illinois politician's blueprint in Congress: It's Rahm Emanuel's playbook, and she agrees.

"Well, look what happened when he was at the [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee]: We won the majority. Look what happened when he was caucus chair: We had an incumbent-protection program. He kept the majority. We lost zero seats when he was responsible for that. I would say that's a winning formula," she said.

Yet that path came with pitfalls too. Those same incumbents were on the other side of a tooth-and-nail fight to keep Pelosi from passing single-payer health care, and in the end, many of them lost after supporting the passable yet incremental Affordable Care Act.

I asked how that strategy can square with the progressive energy of the base, which is again advocating for single-payer health care. Bustos cautioned that the lesson of the Affordable Care Act was to not move too fast, or risk losing the majority entirely.

"Real and lasting change can't only last two years," she said. "Sometimes change happens incrementally, and when it happens in a way that swings the pendulum from the far right to the far left, that makes it difficult in [swing districts] to win the seat and hold on to the seat."

Therein lies the problem for some in the caucus. In addition to being apprehensive about electing a member from a conservative district to leadership for fear of putting a target on her back, members worry it would send the wrong message to the base, according to a Democrat who's undecided in the Bustos-Cicilline race, speaking anonymously to discuss internal conference dynamics.

“Her problem is she would focus a message that alienates our base. We’re not going to win red, rural districts in the near term. Suburbs are our only opportunity and they are profoundly repelled by Trump,” the Democrat said. “[Cicilline is] more in tune with the zeitgeist maybe, but how will he appeal to lots of new centrists?”

A balancing act

I recently followed Cicilline to Tempe, Arizona, where he came to canvass and fundraise for former Phoenix mayor and congressional hopeful Greg Stanton. Before hitting the streets, Stanton hosted a roundtable with leaders in the LGBTQ community, where Cicilline’s value to the caucus is readily apparent in one participant’s question.

“I recognize that the majority of representation on the Democratic side still tends to be white and male and cisgendered. ... Being able to talk to various marginalized experiences that queers and women of color are organizing from is critical for any future congressman,” the participant said. “How do you prepare yourself to unlearn the white-male-centric ways of being that are prohibitive to being able to build authentic and deep relationships to communities of color that are sometimes organizing at these margins?”

“The House Democratic caucus is actually currently a majority-minority caucus of women, people of color, and the LGBT community,” Cicilline replied, to surprised yet approving reactions. But he added, “I take your point. I think we’re all going to have to learn to be better listeners and to be constantly reexamining our old way of thinking.”

Later, as we talk on the way to knock on doors for Stanton, Cicilline said Democratic leaders are of course advocates for the LGBTQ community, but for people like those at the discussion there is no substitute for having one of their own at the table.

“We want to be active participants in our fight for equality,” he said. “For any community that has been marginalized or any community that has suffered some kind of discrimination historically, it’s powerful when people see members of that community ... as part of the decision making group.”

Yet Cicilline is keen not to rely too heavily on his identity in making his case for leadership, neither in terms of sexual orientation nor ideology. Instead, he described his aspiration for an environment in which potential future members as disparate as Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from Queens, N.Y., and Richard Ojeda from rural West Virginia can work together to craft legislation.

“What our caucus needs to do is develop a culture that will allow those dynamics to fully engage and to let an Alexandria make her case on a particular view and let Richard talk about what the impact would be in his district,” he said. “It can’t be, sort of, prebaked.”

When I suggest that this sounds somewhat like a contrast to the top-down, controlled process Pelosi is reputed to run, Cicilline dropped his jaw and widened his eyes in feigned surprise before getting serious. He is no Pelosi acolyte, after all; Cicilline won his current post by challenging the Pelosi-preferred Rep. Matt Cartwright.

“One thing people have shared with me is they want a leadership team that allows for more participation. I think Leader Pelosi is aware of that,” he said. “But I think having members of our leadership team that are constantly stressing that will be good. It will be good for our caucus and it will produce better work.”

If it sounds too utopian, it’s because it may be. But Cicilline said that, by drawing on his experience as a mayor, he hopes to bridge the gap between moderates, who should know that real progress has to be made to fulfill the

promises of progressives, and progressives, who should refrain from making moderate members feel like the party has left them behind,

“We’re going to have to develop the ability to listen to each other and argue—argue fiercely; I’m not suggesting anyone should give up on any of their core beliefs or they should dial it back—but recognize that in the end it’s not just up to you,” he said. “There are some people who are going to be less comfortable with that, so I think we’re going to have to have a procedure that really creates a culture of allowing that, inviting it.”

The Trump factor

The elephant in every room where Democratic politics is being discussed, of course, is Trump and perhaps the most drastic point of departure for these two candidates is the way they talk about him. This, more than anything, may sway the minds of their colleagues as to whether they should sit at a leadership table that may be the lone bulwark against Trump next year.

Though Cicilline has yet to join the roughly 60 House Democrats who have called for impeachment, he said it could be warranted depending on the outcome of Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation.

“I think he has been an abomination and horrible and enacted policies that I disagree with as forcefully as I possibly can. I also think he has done a number of things that raise real questions about his fitness for office,” Cicilline said.

“We have to be prepared to receive that report from the special counsel and take whatever action is appropriate from that, including impeachment if it warrants it.”

Bustos, meanwhile, prefers not to talk about Trump or the investigation because she doesn’t want to alienate the “Trump triers,” who she believes are tired of people trying to make them feel stupid for voting for him.

“I’m not going to go out and brag about [Trump’s accomplishments]. ... But I’m also not going to say that everything he’s done is bad,” she said, singling out the new trade deal with Mexico and Canada as an accomplishment.

“People don’t want to be beat up because they gave Trump a chance. ... I don’t need to turn the knife in the wound.”

In other aspects, though, it seems as if Bustos and Cicilline are talking about the same things in different dialects. It figures since, as cochairs of the DPCC, they came up with the Democratic campaign playbook they called “For the People:” Lower health care costs, rebuild infrastructure, raise wages, and restore trust in government by getting dark money out of politics.

As an example, Cicilline cosponsored the Medicare for All Act, but conceded that although he’ll push for the most progressive policy possible, politics may allow only something more incremental, like expanding the ability for middle-aged people to buy in to Medicare.

“There’s a number of ideas. I think we’ll have to look at what is the landscape right after the election to see how far we can go, but I think the goal has to be everyone has access to healthcare,” he said.

Bustos arrives at that destination from the other side. She would not advocate for Medicare-for-all, but an expanded buy-in seems like an incremental possibility that even swing voters could back.

“I want to make sure we have affordable health care. How we get there and what we call it might be different, but we all want to get there. We all want to make sure people have access to health care,” she said.

In a sense, the paradox of this race for Democrats is that Bustos and Cicilline—along with Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, a fellow DPCC cochair—drew on their disparate experiences to craft an agenda on which all Democrats can run. Both viewpoints were represented and to be successful going forward, the party will have to include both. But in this race, only one will advance.

That has been the criticism of House Democrats, that the longer the top leaders remain, the more new voices in the caucus get suppressed. Maybe Pelosi will serve another decade and Bustos and Cicilline will be lost to history. Maybe this post will only be a stepping stone to a far-off gubernatorial bid or a senate race for them. Then again, if the dominoes fall in just the right way, there may be enough leadership slots up the ladder to include everyone. Bustos and Cicilline certainly have their messages prepared.