

Pro-life profiles up in new U.S. Senate: Senator Harry Reid becomes Democratic minority leader

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Senate Democrats, whose party officially supports abortion rights, have elected an abortion opponent as their leader. And Senate Republicans, whose party officially opposes abortion, backed a rare prochoice senator as chair of one of the Senate's most powerful committees—despite a clamor from the right.

Nevada Senator Harry Reid was chosen by Democrats as minority leader November 16 by acclamation. Reid, a Mormon, is a longtime foe of abortion rights who voted in favor of a 2003 law that bans so-called “partial-birth” abortions.

On the Republican side, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter quelled an uproar from social conservatives against his elevation to the chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Committee members unanimously endorsed Specter November 19 as their next chairman, a post he was expected to get under Senate seniority procedures.

In the past, Specter has been a moderate who favored abortion rights and who has generally supported church-state separation. But on November 19 he also declared at a news conference, “I have not and would not use a litmus test to deny confirmation to pro-life nominees.”

Dozens of Religious Right groups and other conservative organizations had asked Specter's colleagues to bar him from the chairmanship after comments he made to reporters shortly after President Bush was reelected November 3. Specter implied that Bush should not bother choosing far-right nominees for Supreme Court vacancies to the Senate for confirmation, because such nominations would likely be filibustered by Democrats.

Nominees to the federal bench must first be confirmed by the Judiciary Committee, and the chairman has wide latitude over which nominees receive a hearing. But after Specter met with Senate GOP leaders and Republican Judiciary Committee members November 16, several expressed support for him. "Senator Specter handled himself very well," said outgoing committee chairman Orrin Hatch of Utah, reported the *Washington Post*. "I'm for him, as I should be."

But in an e-mail newsletter the next day, Tony Perkins of the conservative Family Research Council asked supporters not to let up pressure on other senators, since a majority of the entire Senate Republican Conference must confirm Specter's nomination when the GOP group meets January 5 to organize for the new session of Congress.

"Each Republican senator must be challenged to stand up for the values of the voters that helped them gain solid control of the Senate, rather than capitulate to the political protocol that advances privilege above principle," Perkins wrote. – *Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*