

For Congress, issues are fraught with risk

By James Oliphant, **Los Angeles Times**, January 10, 2010. pg. A.12

Congress is returning to work to try to complete some unfinished business -- and take on some new initiatives in the time before lawmakers turn their attention to the November elections.

All 435 members of the House and one-third of the Senate are up for reelection this year, creating a charged partisan environment.

Many lawmakers will want to dodge controversial votes that can be used against them by their election opponents. That is particularly true in the House, where Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) has pledged to protect her endangered Democratic majority after a 2009 that saw moderate Democrats take politically risky votes on the stimulus package, a cap-and-trade energy bill, financial regulatory reform and healthcare. Here is a summary of some of the issues that the House and Senate are expected to address:

Healthcare – Democratic negotiators are talking about how to merge the House and Senate versions of the healthcare overhaul, which aims to extend health insurance to more Americans and add new consumer protections for all policyholders. Negotiators hope to produce a final bill for votes in each chamber by early February. Sticking points remain on whether to include a government-run health insurance plan, the size of federal subsidies that would help people buy insurance and how to pay for the overhaul.

Jobs – Democrats are eager to put the healthcare debate behind them and show voters that they are focused on the economy. The House passed a \$154-billion jobs package at the end of last year that involved some infrastructure spending, and it may pursue further measures. The Senate intends to turn its attention to job creation after it completes healthcare.

Financial regulation – The House has approved restrictions aimed at reining in banks and the financial services industry, an attempt to prevent a replay of the Wall Street meltdowns of 2008. But prospects for the package in the Senate are unclear. A key area of controversy is whether to create a new federal agency that would regulate financial products.

Estate tax – The Senate last year failed to act on a House bill that would have preserved a tax on inheritances, causing the tax to lapse for 2010. It returns in 2011 at a higher rate. Senators have pledged to pass a measure that would be applied retroactively for all of 2010, but it will face opposition from anti-tax advocates.

Climate change – The House approved a sweeping energy bill last year that would impose caps on industrial greenhouse gas emissions and allow companies to "trade" allowances. But the bill could be stuck in the Senate, where there is little appetite to tackle such a controversial program after the bruising healthcare debate.

Immigration – The White House and advocates for illegal immigrants have pledged to mount a new push for an overhaul of immigration laws in 2010, but the likelihood of success is not promising. A similar effort in 2007 died amid acrimony in the Senate, and tension between the two parties has only grown since then. Moreover, the House is not likely to vote on any legislation without seeing substantial progress in the Senate.

Guantanamo – The Obama administration is seeking funds that would allow the federal government to purchase and upgrade a maximum-security prison in Illinois to hold detainees now at the U.S. military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Congress would also have to amend a law that allows only detainees who face trial in the United States to be transferred into the country.

Patriot Act – Parts of the controversial anti-terrorism law will lapse if not renewed by the end of February. The biggest issue with liberals involves national security letters, a form of subpoena used by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies to gather information and data from businesses and organizations.

Terrorism – The Senate Homeland Security Committee has opened an inquiry into the shootings last year at Ft. Hood, Texas. It will also hold hearings to examine the counter-terrorism breakdowns that almost allowed an airplane passenger to set off an explosion on a flight bound for Detroit on Christmas Day.