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Pelosi's effectiveness is not rewarded

She is booted from her seat as House speaker after making many enemies by pushing to passage the far-reaching healthcare overhaul, an economic stimulus program and the revamping of financial regulations.

By Richard Simon and Faye Fiore, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Washington

Four years after her ascension as the first female speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi's historic reign is ending with a thud.

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The same hurricane of voter dismay that in 2006 blew Republicans out and the San Francisco Democrat in boomeranged Tuesday, fueled by stubbornly high unemployment and a sense that government had grown too big and too debt-ridden.

Pelosi was keeping a low profile Wednesday, mum about her future. She will hand over the gavel in January to her presumptive successor, Republican John A. Boehner of Ohio. Reelected to her congressional seat, she could seek to return to the less powerful job of minority leader she once held.

Historians predict she will go down with the likes of Sam Rayburn and Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill as one of the country's most effective, albeit partisan, speakers. Even Republicans, who relentlessly bashed Pelosi in campaign ads as a symbol of what's wrong with Washington, consider her an able leader — they just didn't like the direction in which she led.

"The problem with being effective is that you then have to live with the public judgment of the policies that you pass," said UC Berkeley political scientist Bruce Cain. "If the country is divided about those policies, then half of the country is going to hate you and half are going to admire you."

Congress could hardly be called do-nothing on Pelosi's watch. She pushed to passage the most far-reaching healthcare overhaul since the creation of Medicare, an economic stimulus program and the revamping of financial regulations, often with little or no Republican support.

Her help was instrumental in passing the most significant overhaul of congressional ethics rules since Watergate and the first federal minimum wage increase in a decade.

With a comfortable majority and a firm hand, Pelosi drove a progressive agenda. With her at the helm, the House played hare to the Senate's tortoise, churning out more than 400 bills this session that still await Senate action.

Some say she overreached, pushing vulnerable Democrats in conservative districts to cast politically risky votes for bills that had little chance of becoming law.

A case in point: climate change legislation that pleased her environmentally conscious base but has languished in the Senate.

Republicans framed it as an energy tax that would cost jobs. As a result, veteran Democratic Rep. Rick Boucher came under attack for putting "Pelosi's job-killing agenda ahead of Virginia coal." He lost Tuesday.

"Pelosi threw a lot of sharp elbows," said Donald F. Kettl, dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. Added Cain: "She belongs to that school of thought that you're not just in power to hold power; you're in power to do certain things."

But the measure of a leader in Washington isn't how much gets done, it's who holds power in the end. On that scale, Pelosi failed.

"Traditionally, the report card for a leader is, 'Did we get our members reelected?' That's what's wrong with the whole system," said ex-Virginia congressman Tom Davis, a former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Some of what led to the Democrats' sweeping losses Tuesday was beyond Pelosi's control. The economy didn't rebound as hoped. Many of the voters brought out two years ago by Barack Obama didn't seem as energized about voting.

"The administration loaded the Democrats up with extremely controversial legislation, at the same time the stimulus package was not enough to jump-start the economy," said Julian Zelizer, a congressional historian at Princeton University.

While Pelosi racked up a list of legislative triumphs, her party lost the message war. Republicans made sure voters understood the cost of the economic stimulus and healthcare bills, but Democrats never effectively explained the benefits.

An awkward public speaker, Pelosi was always better in the back room than in front of the cameras. She delivered the goods and left it to others — namely the oratorical Obama — to promote them.

"Insofar as these results suggest the failure of the Democrats to be effective in convincing the American people that this very expansive policy agenda really is the correct direction for the country to go ... I have to lay that at the foot of the White House," not Pelosi, said Ronald Peters, a University of Oklahoma political science professor and coauthor of "Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the New American Politics."

If Pelosi was one of the country's most effective House speakers, she was also one of its most polarizing. Despite promises of red and blue working together, signaled by the purple suit she wore at her swearing in, the age-old Washington tradition of the majority ignoring the minority prevailed with her in charge.

"The speaker might as well have posted a 'Do Not Enter' sign on the front of the Capitol," Republican members of the House Rules Committee grouched in a recent report.

Davis blames high unemployment, rather than anything Pelosi did, for Democratic losses. "If unemployment were at 6% right now, she'd be sitting fine," he said.

Pelosi broke what she called "the marble ceiling" and took the speaker's chair. For the first time in 217 years, a woman's face joined the tableau of white men poised behind the president during the State of the Union address.

She left her personal stamp on the House: She got rid of the urinal in the speaker's office and established a greener, healthier Capitol, with organic entrees in the cafeteria and no smoking in the lobby outside the House chamber where lawmakers for decades puffed away between votes. (The latter could change if Boehner, a heavy smoker, takes over.)

On Tuesday night, she watched returns from a Washington hotel room with friends and family, and then monitored the vote count late into the night at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee office.

After midnight, her office released a brief statement declaring, "The outcome of the election does not diminish the work we have done for the American people."

On Wednesday morning, she called Boehner with congratulations.

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