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Pelosi Should Go

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Distinctly Catholic

It is not often that I find myself in agreement with Eric Cantor, the incoming Republican Majority Leader. But Mr. Cantor was spot-on when he said of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's decision to seek the post of minority leader in the upcoming Congress: "I don't think there is any question that this says to the voters, 'We're not listening to you.'" Pelosi should turn the leadership over to someone else.

The principle reason for Pelosi to go is because all analysts agree that the midterms sent a clear signal: We want change. This has been the third change election in a row in fact. It will be difficult enough for President Obama who is the face of the Democratic Party, to convey that kind of change, but it will be even harder with absolutely no changes in the House Democratic leadership. Not since Neil Kinnock led Labor to multiple defeats in the 80s and early 90s has a party leader stayed on after an election defeat in the UK. We should follow their model not least because resigning after an election defeat shows that you honor the voters' intentions.

To be clear, I do not think last week's midterms were a referendum on Pelosi's leadership. I wonder how many Americans really know who she is? In Republican television ads, her name became synonymous with "Washington" but she is hardly to blame for the election losses. Her central role in GOP advertising has to do with the DC-centric world in which campaign operatives and ad men live, and GOP operatives had a good reason to hate Pelosi. She was one of the most effective Speakers in recent memory, steering complicated, politically challenging legislation through the House time and again.

No one doubts Pelosi's skill at the "inside game," but being minority leader is not really an inside game and, to the extent it is, Cong. Steny Hoyer could handle the assignment as well. Hoyer, the current Majority Leader, is as bland as Pelosi is brash, but that may not be an entirely bad thing. President Obama is the leader of the Democratic Party, after all, and the best thing for the Democrats to do in the upcoming

two years is to keep the focus on what promises to be a near-constant tug-of-war within the GOP majority between their willingness to govern and their commitment to ideological purity.

It is entirely unfair, but life is sometimes unfair, that one of the most salient charges against Pelosi is that she is from San Francisco. The city by the bay is one of America's most charming and beautiful places, but the city's name has become short-hand for a kind of goofy liberal politics that many in middle America abhor. They recall the flag burning of anti-war protests, the drug addled hippies, the gay rights revolution, and they cringe. It has been almost 30 years since the Democrats held their national convention in San Francisco, nominating Walter Mondale for the presidency, but since that time, "San Francisco Democrats" has been equivalent to opposition to Reaganism, which remains the unifying glue of the GOP today.

I do not think moderate swing voters will embrace the new GOP leadership if they try to rollback health care reform or pursue other ideologically charged objectives. I suspect some of the incoming class of 2010 will be clunkers and Democrats can win back some seats in two years. It is a shame that there is no star among the Democrats who survived tough races in swing districts to come forward as a new member of the leadership: If Tom Perriello had survived his close race, his elevation to a leadership role would have sent a very precise and welcome signal that Democrats were listening. I also think it is critical that Democrats include a Latino in their higher ranks given the fact that Latino voters saved several House and Senate races for the party this year. These changes in congressional leadership help or hinder at the margins, but a lot of the congressional races that flipped this year are marginal districts.

The most important thing Democrats can do to help win back seats is to assist President Obama in the political pivot he must now accomplish. Having some new faces - some change - on Capitol Hill, will make it easier for the president to project the fact that he heard the electorate and is determined to bring about more change. Pelosi can best help her party by stepping aside. It is a shame she seems unwilling to do so.

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