

Democrats of the 110th Congress elected Maryland Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) as their new majority leader despite attempts by newly-elected House speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to strong-arm party members to support her top pick, Rep John Murtha (D-Pa.).

During the Nov. 16 caucus meeting, Hoyer was elected majority leader 149 to 86.

"I am grateful for the support I have from my colleagues, and [that I] have the majority of the caucus supporting me. I look forward to working with Speaker Pelosi as majority leader," he said.

The pick for Democratic majority leader became controversial after Pelosi announced her support for Murtha early last week. The endorsement undercut the aspirations of Hoyer, 67, who has served in the U.S. House of Representatives for 13 terms and was the Democratic whip. As the minority whip, Hoyer was the second ranking official in the Democratic Party and a natural selection for majority leader.

However, Pelosi's open endorsement and her reported attempts to use her political power to strong-arm House Democrats troubled the waters for what was previously a clear choice.

Hoyer and Pelosi, a native Marylander, have known each other for 40 years and worked together in the political arena. Their relationship has been strained by past competition over the minority leadership. Some have seen Pelosi's endorsement to be a product of rivalry. Drew Hammill, a spokesman for Pelosi, neither confirmed nor denied a rivalry between the two.

"There are differences in the closest of families," Hammill said.

Hoyer said he and Pelosi have worked well together, citing their many years of partnership and said that Pelosi came to him before making her endorsement.

"Nancy told me some time ago that she would personally support Jack. I respect her decision

as the two are very close," he said.

Pelosi also said she chose Murtha for the majority leadership due to his liberal stance on the Iraq war. Murtha has been critical of the war in Iraq saying the administration's war policy "defies logic," and sponsored a House bill to redeploy troops from Iraq. He also remained cynical of President George's W. Bush's decision to appoint Bob Gates to replace resigning Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

"A fresh face is what was best for the administration. A fresh policy is what is best for America," Murtha said in a statement expressing disappointment at the President's continued effort to "stay the course" despite the appointment.

However Murtha, a conservative Democrat, has views that are out of step with members of his party. He has voted in favor of a number of pro-life bills and has been lax on finance reform.

Hoyer, a more conventional Democrat, expressed optimism leading up the Nov. 16 majority leader vote.

"I'm gonna win. There's no doubt in my mind," Hoyer said. "I have the votes of the majority of the existing members and I think I'll have the majority of the votes of the new members."

Fellow House members and top-ranking committee members Reps. John Dingell, Henry Waxman, Barney Frank, Tom Lantos, Jim Oberstar, Bart Gordon, Bennie Thompson and John Spratt all signed a letter expressing their support of Hoyer.

"Steny has proven time and time again that he has the skills, ability and energy to help our diverse caucus achieve consensus and succeed," the letter read.

During the caucus, Democrats officially made Pelosi the first female speaker of the House. Pelosi was unanimously voted into the position moments before the majority leader vote. As

speaker of the House, Pelosi has authority within her party and put her second in line for the presidency.

However the majority leader vote shows that while she is in a position of power, Pelosi's influence has yet to be determined. Officials close to Pelosi remain optimistic despite her failed attempt to sway party members.

"This won't be a problem," said Hammill. "They're [Democrats] unified around the issues."