



Recent Elections May Affect Higher Education

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The results are in. The country has spoken. And, no matter what party you belong to, it's undeniable that change is in the air. The Democratic takeover after the recent elections may lead to a considerably different agenda than the one slated to develop under current Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman Howard "Buck" McKeon (R-CA).

Buck McKeon's present reign is expected to end, as frontrunner George Miller (D-CA) pushes to assume chairmanship of the committee during the 110th Congress. In a recent Higher Education news release, Miller spoke in anticipation of his new role: "On Tuesday, voters clearly expressed their desire for a new direction for America. The American people do not believe that simply staying the course—whether in Iraq or here at home—is acceptable any longer."

Miller has outlined his intentions, clearly identifying his top priorities. In keeping with his stated focus on America's children, families, and workers, Miller wants to increase the national minimum wage, reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act, and work to address the issue of making higher education affordable for all. Currently, college tuition is steadily rising, household incomes are falling or remaining stagnant, and federal student loans aren't filling in the gaps.

Miller strongly believes that the effort cannot be made by one party and that divisions must be bridged in order to solve these outstanding concerns. "Democrats will work in a bipartisan way with Republicans so that, together, we can take our country in a new direction. We will work to ensure not only that the economy grows but that all families benefit from it. We will invest in our schools, colleges, and students so that every child has an opportunity to succeed and so that America maintains its economic leadership in the world," he said.

There is also speculation that Miller will make an aggressive attempt to reduce borrower interest rates; most prognosticators estimate that he'll try to cut them in half. The focus on interest rates stems from the epidemic of student debt. The Project on Student Debt posits that Miller's platform is likely to propose an expansion of the economic hardship deferment. These huge proposed actions toward reform raise questions about how Miller intends to finance them. One possible answer is that he'll revisit the Student Aid Reward Act, a bill that would provide incentives to schools to leave the FFEL program in favor of the Direct Loan program.

Other key committee dealings will include oversight hearings on higher education opportunities, student loan marketing, and overall management of the Department of Education under the Bush administration.

Undoubtedly, the November elections have set the ball in motion for many changes. In the world of higher education, college students (and future voters) will experience these changes firsthand.