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## Union speech could make or break Bush

By Fred Ortega Staff Writer  
Whittier Daily News

President Bush tonight will deliver his sixth State of the Union speech - his first before a Democrat-controlled Congress and one that analysts and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle say could set the tone for his final two years in office.

Bush goes into his speech with the lowest approval rating of his presidency, according to the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll. Thirty-three percent of respondents in that survey approve of the president's performance, a ranking that is lower than any president's on the eve of a State of the Union speech since Richard Nixon at the height of the Watergate scandal in 1974.

Even such stalwart supporters as Rep. David Dreier, R-Glendora, say that Bush must find a way to reach beyond a bitter partisan divide if he is to reinvigorate his domestic agenda and win back a wary public.

"The president needs to provide a speech that will take steps toward reinstilling confidence, which is obviously lacking out there," said Dreier, who lost his leadership of the powerful House Rules Committee in November in part because of voter dissatisfaction with Republicans over Iraq.

Dreier expects the president to talk about issues such as health care and immigration - areas where he might find common ground with Democrats. But he added that the president cannot avoid talking about the war in Iraq.

"We all want to get out of Iraq, we want it to end, but we don't want it to collapse into something the likes of Iran and Syria," said Dreier, who supports the president's plan to send an additional 21,500 troops to help quell the ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq. About 65 percent of the American public opposes sending more troops, according to the Post-ABC News poll.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, was adamant that tonight's speech is the last opportunity Bush has to strike a bipartisan tone for his final two years in office. But he added the possibility that Bush would change his mind on the troop surge in Iraq - likely the biggest point of contention between Democrats and the president - is remote.

"Americans hunger for a new course and a new dialogue in Washington," Schiff said. "They want progress on issues like energy independence, health care and global climate change, and an end to the personal and partisan rancor. It is not too late for the president to demonstrate he can be the 'uniter' he once aspired to be."

Dreier said Bush will likely talk about climate change, but he does not expect the president to deviate from his past opposition to mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emissions.

"The jury is still out on this notion of what role human beings have on \," Dreier said, echoing the president's previous statements on the matter.

There may be some room for compromise when it comes to climate change policy, said Michael Alvarez, a politics professor at Caltech in Pasadena.

"I think the door is open there, given what \ Schwarzenegger has done here in California, initiating what could be a new Republican way on climate change," said Alvarez, referring to the governor's signing in September of landmark legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Another area where the president can propose new policy amenable to Democrats is health care, said Kareem Crayton, assistant professor of law and political science at USC.

"A policy he can agree \ on is that of prescription drug prices," Crayton said. "He could make some creative changes that put the country more on track to providing some kind of comprehensive solution to the health care issue."

Crayton also listed immigration and additional funding for the No Child Left Behind Act as issues Bush can tackle that Democratic leaders have shown interest in, as well as more funding to rehabilitate New Orleans.

"These things may be able to ameliorate the view of his record that most people seem to share right now," Crayton said.

The president has already acknowledged that the voters sent him a message in the mid-term elections, and this is an opportunity to show what he is going to do with that message, said Dan Schnur, a California-based Republican strategist.

"It sounds like he is going to lay out a series of proposals that ought to be able to develop support from both parties," Schnur said, also listing health care, immigration and energy as likely cornerstones of Bush's speech. "None of these are things that are going to excite the conservative base. But when your party loses Congress, you have to make some adjustments."

Wire reports contributed to this story.

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