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For Obama, many liberal wish lists await

Stymied for years, groups see chance

By Mike Dorning and Jim Tankersley | Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON — For many years, progressive groups and their causes have been out in the political wilderness.

Now, with President-elect Barack Obama preparing to take the White House and Democrats firmly in control of Congress, the party's liberal constituencies can see their way to a promised land.

For progressives, that means a nation where it is easier for unions to organize workers, where federal laws ban job discrimination against gays, hate crime laws are expanded and public lands are shielded from logging and oil drilling.

Instead of waging the defensive battles they have fought for years, liberal groups—labor unions, environmentalists and others—are eagerly preparing for new confrontations with business and conservative interests. This time, they feel secure in having allies within Washington's power centers.

"Everybody is seeing the energy that has been unleashed in this election cycle," said Eli Pariser, executive director of the anti-war MoveOn.org. "My time in politics started during the Bush administration. I certainly haven't been in any meetings with anyone in the executive branch before where there were a lot of nodding heads."

The change in political climate has generated at once a sense of optimism and a determination to seize the moment. While advocates express a willingness to allow the new administration space to pursue its agenda on its own terms, they are determined not to be thwarted.

MoveOn.org, organizing a grass-roots lobbying campaign around goals such as health-care reform, held 1,200 house parties across the country one night recently.

The Service Employees International Union plans to devote a third of its union locals' resources to a "First 100 Days" campaign to lobby for legislation.

It has been 14 years since Democrats controlled both elected branches of government. Some count more years in the wilderness, starting with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Bill Clinton charted a largely centrist course and had only two years with a Democratic congressional majority.

Obama won election on a platform that unabashedly embraced causes dear to the party's liberal wing: withdrawal of troops from Iraq, a national health-care plan and investment in clean energy.

Goodwill among the left is such that few have publicly complained so far when Obama sometimes has distanced himself from his commitments. The response from labor was muted when reports surfaced recently that he would postpone acting on a campaign promise to renegotiate NAFTA by

ordering a study of the trade agreement. And there was no outcry when he signaled in September that he would delay delivering on a promise to end the Pentagon's "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays serving in the military.

"People are willing to wait a little while," said Democratic strategist Steve Elmendorf. But, he added, pent-up demand is still considerable: "Every interest group, every group in the party, has a list."

Some wish lists are relatively easily fulfilled. A high priority for women's groups, a Fair Pay Act making it easier to sue over past pay discrimination, came within four votes of overcoming a filibuster in Congress. A top priority for civil rights and gay- rights groups is an expanded federal hate crimes law, which was vetoed by President George W. Bush.

Others face bigger challenges. A top goal for unions is the "Employee Free Choice Act," which would make it easier to organize workers but is vigorously opposed by business groups. It would allow unions to be certified as collective bargaining representatives by gathering signatures from a majority of workers at a business rather than holding a secret ballot.

Though most in Washington expect that big agenda items will have to wait until after the Obama administration and Congress take up a stimulus plan to address the economic crisis, progressive groups are already at work.

"Progressives realize that protecting those suffering because of the economic meltdown has to come first," said Arianna Huffington, an author and Internet publisher working to rally the movement with a common agenda.

Still, the list is long.

Unions want to make sure the economic stimulus includes a large infrastructure building program to create jobs for unemployed construction workers. Civil rights groups and advocates for low-income families want the economic legislation to allow bankruptcy judges to alter repayment terms for mortgages.

Environmentalists want the stimulus package to include "green jobs" via alternative-energy development. Gay-rights activists want to make sure gays have equal job access and protection.

After tangling with the Bush administration over major policies and minor regulations—including protections for air, water, wildlife, forests and other public lands — environmental groups expect swift and sweeping action from Obama on nearly every issue that matters to them.

Environmentalists expect Obama to "hit the reset button," as the Sierra Club's Josh Dorner puts it, on a host of regulations that Bush weakened, to solicit more input from scientists in framing environmental policy and to use the Environmental Protection Agency to limit greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, in keeping with a Supreme Court ruling from last year.

Progressives say the Obama transition team's appointments and meetings with interest groups signal an open door at the White House.

"It feels like there's an air of transparency," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "As people are appointed, and progressive people, the word spreads. And the word is, 'I look forward to talking with you.' ... It is this different feeling, that the door is not closed—the door is opening."

The Washington Bureau's Christi Parsons contributed to this report.