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Democrats unable to make many noticeable changes

By Charles Babington
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WASHINGTON — Under a portrait of George Washington and a sign proclaiming “A New Direction,” Democratic lawmakers boasted of their accomplishments their first five months running Congress.

Their press release covered two pages.

Yet most people might be excused for hardly noticing, except maybe those who are paid the minimum wage or who live in hurricane-ravaged areas.

Upon taking control in January, Democrats led efforts to increase the minimum wage for the first time in a decade and to force modest spending increases in hurricane and drought relief, children’s health care and a few other areas.

Beyond that, the majority party has found it difficult or impossible to redirect federal poli-

cies, thwarted by a veto-wielding Republican president whose congressional allies hold nearly half the Senate seats and a significant portion of the House.

To the frustration of their liberal base, Democrats have been unable to mandate a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq. Nor have they found a way to boost federal support for embryonic stem cell research, rewrite tax and spending priorities or force the removal of an embattled attorney general.

Their promises to reduce student loan rates, overhaul lobbying practices and put in place recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission are works in progress, at best.

They have largely abandoned their push to allow the government to negotiate prescription drug prices for Medicare in the face of Bush’s opposition.

Democratic voters might be disappointed, but they should

not be surprised, say congressional scholars and political strategists. While Democrats can set the legislative agenda and investigate the Bush administration, they “don’t have the power” to determine the results, said Ronald Walters of the University of Maryland.

Lacking the two-thirds majorities needed in both chambers to override a veto, Democrats must make the most of their abilities to pressure the White House, hold oversight hearings and drive the toughest bargains they can, he said.

Even the Democrats’ most clear-cut legislative victory — raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 from the current \$5.15 over three years — has questionable impact.

Only a small fraction of workers earns the minimum wage, and Democrats had to buy GOP support with \$4.84 billion in new tax cuts for small businesses.