The aide said Reid was preserving the option of making changes with a simple majority vote.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Congress is ushering in the new and the old - dozens of eager freshmen determined to change Washington and the harsh reality of another stretch of bitterly divided government.

The 113th Congress will convene Thursday at the constitutionally required time of noon for pomp, pageantry and politics as newly elected members of the House and Senate are sworn in and the speaker of the Republican-controlled House is chosen. The traditions come against the backdrop of a mean season that closed out an angry election year.

A deal to avert the "fiscal cliff" of big tax increases and spending cuts split the parties in New Year's Day votes, and the House's failure to vote on a Superstorm Sandy aid package before adjournment prompted GOP recriminations against the leadership.

"There's a lot of hangover obviously from the last few weeks of this session into the new one, which always makes a fresh start a lot harder," Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas, said.

For all the change of the next Congress, the new bosses are the same as the old bosses.

President Barack Obama secured a second term in the November elections, and Democrats tightened their grip on the Senate for a 55-45 edge in the new two-year Congress, ensuring that Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., will remain in charge. Republicans maintained their majority in the House but will have a smaller advantage, 235-199. Former Democratic Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr.'s Illinois seat is the one vacancy.

Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, has faced a bruising few weeks with his fractious GOP caucus but seemed poised to win another term as speaker. He mollified angry Republicans from New York and New Jersey on Wednesday with the promise of a vote Friday on $9 billion of the storm relief package and another vote on the remaining $51 billion on Jan. 15.

The GOP members quickly abandoned their chatter about voting against the speaker.

The new Congress still faces the ideological disputes that plagued the dysfunctional 112th Congress, one of the least productive in more than 60 years. Tea partyers within the Republican ranks insist on fiscal discipline in the face of growing deficits and have pressed for deep cuts in spending as part of a reduced role for the federal government. Democrats envision a government with enough resources to help the less fortunate and press for the wealthiest to pay more in taxes.

"We can only hope for more help," said Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who was re-elected in November. "Any time you have new members arriving you have that expectation of bringing fresh ideas and kind of a vitality that is needed. We hope that they're coming eager to work hard and make some difficult decisions and put the country first and not be bogged down ideologically."

The next two months will be crucial, with tough economic issues looming. Congress put off for just eight weeks automatic spending cuts to defense and domestic programs that were due to begin with the new year. The question of raising the nation's borrowing authority also must be decided. Another round of ugly negotiations between Obama and Congress is not far off.

There are 12 newly elected senators - eight Democrats, three Republicans and one independent, former Maine Gov. Angus King, who will caucus with the Democrats. They will be joined by Rep. Tim Scott, the first black Republican in decades, who was tapped by South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley to fill the remaining term of Sen. Jim DeMint. The conservative DeMint resigned to lead the Heritage Foundation think tank.

In a sign of some diversity for the venerable body, the Senate will have three Hispanics - Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and one of the new members, Republican Ted Cruz of Texas. There will be 20 women in the 100-member chamber, the highest number yet.

At least one longtime Democrat, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, will be departing in a few weeks, nominated by Obama to be secretary of state. That opens the door to former Republican Sen. Scott Brown, the only incumbent senator to lose in November's elections, to possibly make a bid to return to Washington.

Eighty-two freshmen join the House - 47 Democrats and 35 Republicans. Women will total 81 in the 435-member body - 62 Democrats and 19 Republicans.

In the Senate, Reid and Republican leader Mitch McConnell are negotiating possible changes in the rules as lawmakers face a bitter partisan fight over filibusters, according to a Senate Democratic leadership aide who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about private matters.

Reid has complained that Republicans filibuster too often and has threatened to impose strict limits with a simple majority vote. That step could set off retaliatory delays and other maneuvers by Republicans, who argue that they filibuster because Reid often blocks them from offering amendments.

The aide said Reid was preserving the option of making changes with a simple majority vote.

The start of the new Congress also offers a comeback for one lawmaker. Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill.,

who suffered a stroke last January and has been absent for the past year, plans a dramatic return to the Capitol by walking up the 45 steps to the Senate's doors.