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Free Reigns for the President? U.S. Congress after the Elections

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Donald Trump did not win a landslide on November 5. This was one of the closest elections results for the popular vote in American history. While the Electoral College determined the final outcome, Trump won by less than 1.7 percent of the votes cast. In that light, the country remains a very closely divided nation. This is equally true of the results in Congress when predicting the future course of a newly elected president. While it is not unusual for a new President to enter the White House with majorities in both chambers of Congress – as Trump managed to accomplish – it is not a guarantee that the following four years will be smooth sailing for the president’s agenda.

Both the House and Senate will be majority Republican; the House will retain its GOP majority, and the Senate will flip from the Democrats. Yet, in both cases, the margins are narrow. Both the negotiations and the battles within Congress will be as much between the Democrats and Republicans as they will within each of the two parties themselves.

In the House, that margin could be as low as two votes, if House Republicans nominated by Trump for other positions in his administrations are approved by the Senate. In that case, the nominees would both need to resign from the House, and it would take a special election to replace them. House Speaker Republican Mike Johnson will face significant challenges to maintain his majority with many diverse opinions and factions among the Republicans. One need only recall the chaos in the House in its efforts to choose a new speaker last year. Democrats also have their own challenges in forging coalitions within their groups, as could be seen in the debates over the war in Gaza as well as in dealing with the border issue during the Kamala Harris campaign.

The Senate will give the new President Pro Temp, Republican John Thune, a majority of six votes. But the Senate Republican members are not all in line with Trump’s policies or preferred nominations for his administration as illustrated by the recent defeat of Matt Gaetz for Attorney General and by continuing controversies over other nominations.



High Volatility

The fact is that the volatile swings of congressional majorities and minorities have become far more frequent in the last three decades in Washington, D.C, a fact that reflects the continuing shifts in parties, policies, polarization, and power in the American environment.

Congress was not always so unpredictable. Democrats held the House majority for 40 years between 1954 and 1994. Republicans regained control of the Senate in 1981. But it was only in 1995 that they were able to gain control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in decades. The volatility picked up after 2000. Democrats regained both the House and the Senate in 2006, but Republicans won the House back in 2010. In 2014, Republicans took control of the Senate and the House, but the Democrats in 2018 took back the House. In 2020, Democrats regained control of both the House and Senate, but Republicans regained control of the House in 2022. And now in 2024, both chambers of Congress will be ruled by a thin GOP majority. The next battle over the Congress will be fought in 2026.

These increasing swings and shifts reflect the changing dynamic nature of U.S. domestic politics, driven by economic developments, dramatic political events, public opinion evolution, and indeed the ways in which voters identify themselves with parties and personalities. National political issues like health care, a fiscal crisis, or security issues such as border control controversy or wars abroad all drive voters to the polls with different attention and intentions.

Other events, such as the attacks on 9/11 or the pandemic also shake up the atmosphere and impact the shifts of power in Congress and the White House.

A Reflection of Society

Congress is in many ways a reflection of American society shaped by multiple interrelated factors. Political polarization, the influence of special interest groups, the enormous pressure of campaign finances, changes in media resources and dynamics, and the evolving nature of political leadership all contribute to a more volatile and less predictable legislative environment. Understanding these factors can help provide insight into the complexities of modern American politics and the challenges faced by lawmakers and voters in navigating this rather treacherous landscape.

The Power of the Individual

While the role of the two main political parties remains of central importance in shaping the agenda in Congress, individual members can wield substantial power and influence. That is not only the case for the top leadership positions in both chambers. The ability of members to acquire that leverage emerges from their use of both money and the media not only to sustain their own jobs in Congress but to share both with other colleagues. Large public profiles translate into higher amounts of financial support, which enable some members to help others maintain their respective majorities.





Both House and Senate members are constantly chasing money for their efforts to either win re-election or prevent competitors from challenging them in their respective electoral districts or states. Raising funds is a large and constant part of the work of all members.

Traditional affiliations with political parties as mobilizing agents are also less influential today among various demographic groups, as could be seen in the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Assumptions of who are reliable sources of support among Black, Hispanic and younger voters proved faulty. The profiles of the two major parties have evolved in different directions over recent decades. In this era of high polarization, political identities are shaped by far more than the traditional Democratic or Republican labels. They are shaped increasingly by personalities with whom voters can identify, by the issues which define their interests, and by changing self-identification.

One impact of these trends is seen in some states which change their majorities over consecutive elections due to changing political demographics. States like Georgia, Arizona, or Pennsylvania exemplify these shifts in political majorities. Given the greater variety of members of Congress moving through this new pattern of political affiliation and campaign strategies, the capacity of traditional Congressional leaders of both parties to sustain discipline and unity in voting patterns is less pronounced and hence less reliable.

A president who wins an election is given some deference at the beginning of the term, particularly by members of the president's party, if they see that their own re-election was assisted by the popularity of the president. But loyalty is not inexhaustible. House members run their re-election campaigns almost constantly for their biennial election. One third of the Senate is up for election every two years as well. Even though the vast majorities of incumbents are successful, thin majorities in each chamber can be thwarted with a few failed election results.

Balance of Power

The first two years of Trump's term as president will be aimed at trying to achieve as much of his agenda as possible – whatever that may be. He is now expecting the congressional Republicans – and in particular the Senate – to approve his nominations and then his policies. Trump has only one term ahead so he will not be on the ballot in 2028. He starts now with a powerful base of influence. Yet, how the leaders and their colleagues in each chamber respond to his demands will define his success. But that is not a guarantee. This makes it difficult to predict legislative outcomes.

One might recall the fate of Richard Nixon. He actually won a landslide election in 1972, but in less than two years he was forced out of office in 1974 with the threat of an impeachment over his head. It was also Republicans who confronted him with that threat based on criminal allegations, regardless of how useful his re-election in 1972 was for them.





Trump was elected despite a long record of impeachments, indictments, and convictions that might have derailed every other candidate in past years. None of that prevented a thin majority of American voters from supporting him. But congressional elections will continue for all members of the House and part of the Senate and those candidates will have their own ambitions beyond Trump. How Trump now handles his second chance as president and how he will use the office of the presidency for his agenda will determine in no small measure how each and every member of Congress – Democrat and Republican alike – evaluate their relationship with him. And they, along with the voters, will all certainly have their own agendas.

About the Author

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