NEW MAJORITIES, NEW GAVELS: WHAT CONGRESSIONAL TURNOVER MEANS FOR BUSINESS

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The next Congress will look different no matter how the election turns out. If the House, the Senate, or both change hands, as many expect, new majorities will bring new chairs, new committee ratios, and new policy and oversight priorities. Even in a chamber that does not flip, retirements, term limits, and contested leadership races will reshuffle key decision-makers. Stakeholders should be asking now whether the members and staff who know their issues will still be in the same seats next year, and who will replace them if not.

Vacancy counts only tell part of the story. Losing one effective champion can matter more than turning over several rank-and-file members, and work that seemed settled may have to be negotiated again. Planning for 2027 means building new relationships and deciding which priorities can survive a restart.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Most of these decisions will be made in the next 10 weeks. After the 3 November election, each party holds organizing meetings to elect leaders and approve committee assignments, which are formally adopted once the new Congress convenes.[1] New members are attending orientation sessions, networking among their new peers, and hiring staff. Retiring members and those who lost their reelection bids are moving out of their offices and are relegated to cubicle spaces with limited access to staff. House Republicans will decide term-limit waivers and contested gavels, and the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee will make leadership and committee recommendations for House Democrats.

The lame-duck session runs at the same time. Congress returns 9 November, and current funding expires 11 December. The defense authorization, an expired farm bill, extension of certain infrastructure programs, possible consideration of the debt ceiling, and a potential permitting bill are also in play. If control is about to change, the outgoing majority may push to finish full-year appropriations while it still holds the gavels, and the incoming majority may prefer a short-term extension into 2027. There is still no agreement on top-line appropriations spending levels, making decision-making difficult. The result could be an omnibus, another stopgap, or a mix of the two.

The 120th Congress convenes 3 January 2027. The House typically adopts its rules package that day, and the package can shift committee jurisdiction or create select committees. The current Congress, for example, reestablished the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party with new investigative jurisdiction.[2] Leadership races matter too, since party leaders shape how committee seats are assigned. Should Democrats win control of the House, a new leadership team will take

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office, with the expected election of Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) to Speaker, Rep. Katherine Clark (D-MA) to Majority Leader, and Rep. Pete Aguilar (D-CA) to Majority Whip.

TURNOVER ON BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE

On the Democratic side, current ranking members are typically in line to chair if Democrats win the House, though it is not automatic. The Steering and Policy Committee recommends chairs and ranking members, and the full caucus votes on them.[3] Retirements and contested races could open several top Democratic spots, so stakeholders should know who leads each committee's Democrats today and who could be next. For instance, leadership contests are underway for the House Financial Services Committee, where longtime Democratic leader Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA) is being challenged by Rep. Sean Casten (D-IL) and by Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA), and at the Education and Workforce Committee (which Democrats are likely to rename the “Education and Labor Committee”), where longtime Democratic leader Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) is being challenged by Rep. Jahana Hayes (D-CT) and by Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR).

House Republicans face several leadership contests driven by retirements, members stepping aside, and the conference's three-term limit on committee leadership. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) is seeking a waiver to keep leading the Armed Services Committee, while Reps. Rob Wittman (R-VA), Ronny Jackson (R-TX), and Trent Kelly (R-MS) compete for the gavel. At the Agriculture Committee, Rep. Austin Scott (R-GA) is challenging Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-PA), who is also seeking a waiver. None of these races has been decided. If Republicans hold the House, they decide the chairs. If the House flips, they decide the ranking members who will lead the response to a new majority's agenda and oversight.

In the Senate, Republicans limit members to six years as chair and, separately, six years as ranking member of any standing committee.[4] Sen. Bill Cassidy's (R-LA) primary loss opens the top Republican spot on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) is the most-senior potential successor, but he already chairs the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) is another possibility, should he win his election. If Republicans keep the Senate, that choice will decide the HELP Committee chair. If Democrats win the Senate, they would decide the ranking member, and the bigger question becomes who leads HELP Committee's Democrats. A move by a likely successor could also open leadership on another committee.

THE FIGHT FOR COMMITTEE SEATS

Competition for committee seats deserves as much attention as the gavel races, and committee personnel can shift widely with changes in committee ratios. If Democrats win the House, for instance, 10 or more new Democrats could join the Ways and Means Committee, reflecting both departures and the extra seats that come with majority status. At least eight members, four from each party, are expected to leave the Energy and Commerce Committee. Neither figure is a final vacancy count, since departures do not translate one for one into new assignments. In the Senate, the Finance Committee will lose five Republicans, or six if Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) loses his race.

The size of each majority will also shape the math. Each party's share of committee seats roughly tracks its strength in the full chamber, but the House and Senate get there differently. House rules do not fix committee

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sizes or ratios. Majority leadership sets them, sometimes after talks with the minority, and has historically given the majority a larger share of committee seats than its absolute majority.[5] The gap is widest on the most powerful panels. The Rules Committee has been set at nine majority members to four minority members since the late 1970s,[6] and the majority generally holds extra seats on the Ways and Means Committee and Appropriations Committee.

The Senate has more structure. Its rules set committee sizes, but the majority and minority leaders can agree to temporarily add up to two members to a committee so the majority party holds a majority on every standing committee.[7] In a chamber that flips, the new majority gets the extra seats, and thus, some members of today's majority will lose committee seats. As a result, stakeholders should not assume current rosters will carry over, even for returning members.

New members also bring their own district interests and views on compromise, so an argument that worked with a committee before may need to be rebuilt. Stakeholders should identify who in the next Congress can explain their issue to colleagues, defend a controversial provision, and tie it to constituent concerns. New staff, or old staff in new positions, need to learn subject matter and understand the equities facing the member they work for in the new assignment. That takes more than updating a contact list.

THE REAL COST OF STARTING OVER

Bills that do not become law in this current Congress generally have to be reintroduced in the next one. A new chair or ranking member may also revisit compromises, ask for different evidence, or put a viable proposal behind new priorities.

If either chamber flips, divided government is likely to push most significant legislating into must-pass bills, such as appropriations and the defense authorization. Stakeholders with stand-alone bills should think now about which vehicle could realistically carry their priority and who will control it.

For the lame-duck session, stakeholders should separate proposals with a credible vehicle, resolved objections, and bipartisan support in both chambers from those bills with merely an enthusiastic sponsor, and they should not count on a departing chair to close a final deal. A narrow win now may be better than restarting a broader negotiation next year, but an incomplete or thinly supported proposal may not be worth the push.

Where finishing this year is not realistic, document the completed work, including negotiated text, the reasons behind compromises, technical evidence, and open disagreements. A new committee will not be bound by its predecessor's positions, but a clear record makes the restart easier and buttresses allies still on the committee.

LOOK BELOW THE GAVEL

The House Appropriations Committee shows how much can change in the full committee. Rep. Mark Amodei's (R-NV) departure opens the top Republican spot on the Homeland Security Subcommittee, and Rep. Steny Hoyer's (D-MD) retirement opens the top Democratic spot on Financial Services and General Government subcommittee. If Democrats win the House, Hoyer's successor would chair that subcommittee, and Amodei's would be ranking member. Stakeholders pursuing specific programs should track changes at the subcommittee level.

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Staff changes deserve the same attention. Chairs control significant staffing resources, and committee staff do much of the work on legislation and oversight.[8] A stakeholder could keep its champion but lose the staff expertise behind a technical proposal. Track staff directors, counsels, and policy staff along with members, and bring a short issue history to transition meetings rather than a general introduction.

OVERSIGHT DOES NOT WAIT FOR LEGISLATION

A change in control would bring the biggest oversight shift, starting in the House, where a new majority would control agendas, hearings, and subpoenas. Reps. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) and Robert Garcia (D-CA), the top Democrats on the Judiciary Committee and the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, respectively, have used their posts in the minority to press the administration, and both are in line to chair those committees if Democrats retake the House. Rep. Garcia has named corporate corruption among his top targets. Companies in regulated industries, federal contractors, and those tied to administration priorities could see more letters, document requests, and hearing invitations.

In the Senate, Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) is expected to succeed retiring Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI) as the top Democrat on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. She is already building an oversight agenda and investigative capacity, with reported interest in government spending, potential waste and fraud, and administration conduct. If Democrats win the Senate, she would chair the committee, with significant subpoena power.

A Democratic Senate would also control which nominees move and how quickly, which could leave more positions filled on an acting basis and slow some regulatory agendas. That matters for stakeholders with business before agencies that have open or contested leadership posts.

Stakeholders can get pulled into an inquiry even if they are not the main target. Government affairs, legal, compliance, and communications teams should review sensitive federal relationships, check the facts behind public positions, and decide who would coordinate a response if a committee reaches out. None of that preparation needs to wait for the election results.

COMPLETE, PRESERVE, OR RECONSIDER

Stakeholders should not assume current relationships will carry over, and they should not walk away from current work too early. One practical approach is to sort each major priority into one of the three following categories:

Complete

Is there a realistic lame-duck opportunity, an available vehicle, and enough agreement to justify the push? Identify the remaining decision-maker or objection.

Preserve

What needs to carry into the next Congress, and what would be lost if a key member or staffer leaves? Build the record now and identify potential successors in both chambers.

Reconsider

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Could a new decision-maker make a stalled proposal viable or call for a different approach? Determine whether the original obstacle was substantive, procedural, or specific to one office before assuming turnover will fix it.

For each priority, note the business impact, the people it depends on, the next decision point, and who owns it internally. That makes it easier to decide where to focus advocacy time and resources.

CONCLUSION

With at least one chamber likely to change hands and significant turnover in both, stakeholders that decide now what to finish, preserve, and rethink will be better positioned when the new Congress convenes.

We are monitoring the election results, potential changes in committee leadership and priorities, lame-duck activity, and what all of it means for oversight, appropriations, and agency action. We will share additional analysis as the results and their practical effects become clearer.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Rules Governing Senate Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures.

[2] H.Res. 5.

[3] Rules Governing Senate Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures.

[4] Rules Governing Senate Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures.

[5] *Id.*

[6] Committee on Rules History.

[7] Rules Governing Senate Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures.

[8] *Id.*

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