

Mid-term elections bring new members of Congress and shifts in leadership

November 30, 2018

The results of the November 6, 2018, mid-term elections will shape geoscience-related legislative priorities for the next two years and beyond. The Democratic Party won control of the U.S. House of Representatives, while the Republican Party retained control of the U.S. Senate. For the House, this means that Democrats will gain the committee chairmanships – with the power to set the committee agenda and preside over meetings and hearings – and ultimately get to decide which bills come to the floor for a vote and a chance to pass the chamber.

When the 116th Congress begins in January 2019, more than eighty freshman lawmakers will be sworn in to the House and Senate, including many new members who may emerge as strong players on Earth, ocean, and atmospheric science policy issues. Still, Congress will face significant barriers to policymaking when it returns next year to a divided legislative branch. With split control of the two chambers, bipartisan collaboration will be vital for the full passage of any bill in the next two years.

On November 14, both parties in the Senate chose their leadership for the next Congress. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) will remain at the top of their respective caucuses. Senator John Thune (R-SD) will become the majority whip – the second-ranking spot for Senate Republicans, whose task is to ensure party discipline in the federal legislature – and must relinquish his chairmanship of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee in 2019. Senator Dick Durban (D-IL) will retain the minority whip slot for Senate Democrats.

In the House, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA-23) and Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA-1) will remain in their leadership positions for the soon-to-be-minority party next session of Congress. Of relevance to the geoscience community, both McCarthy and Scalise are seen as allies of the energy industry, while neither is popular with the environmental community – as reflected by their League of Conservation Voters scores of 3% and 4%, respectively. House Democrats [elected](#) Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD-5) to serve as majority leader for the next Congress, and Representative James Clyburn (D-SC-6), currently assistant Democratic leader, to [become](#) majority whip. A majority of Democrats voted to nominate Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA-12) to serve as speaker of the House; however, the entire chamber still needs to vote to officially elect the House speaker as their first order of business at the start of the new session on January 3.

While many committee chairmanships are still awaiting confirmation, House Republicans have definitively picked Representative Frank Lucas (R-OK-3) to [become](#) ranking member of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, and Representative Sam Graves (R-MO-6) to [serve](#) as ranking member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), currently the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has expressed interest in taking over as ranking member of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. If Senator Cantwell does replace outgoing Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) as the top Democrat on commerce, Senator Joe Manchin (R-WV) may be the likeliest contender to take over the natural resources committee's ranking member spot.

As Democrats prepare to take over the House majority in January, three Democratic committee leaders announced that they will hold a series of hearings early next year to assess the effects of climate change and the need for action. The [announcement](#) was made on November 14 by Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ-6), Natural Resources Ranking Member Raúl M. Grijalva (D-AZ-3), and Science, Space and Technology Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX-30). All three of these members are expected to take the helm as chairs of their respective committees next Congress.

Sources: E&E News; The New York Times; Roll Call; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.
