



The GOP controls both Congress and the White House: What can President-elect Trump achieve with a Republican Congress?

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Election Results

In a departure from the voter tradition of preferring a divided government, i.e. one party controlling the presidency and another the Congress, voters in the 2016 election gave control of both the Executive and Legislative branches of government to the Republican Party (GOP).

According to a recent Gallup poll, one in five Americans believe it is best for the president to be from one political party and for Congress to be controlled by another. This is the lowest level of public support for a divided government over the past 15 years. Fewer Republicans want divided government now than four years ago; fewer Democrats want the same party to control Congress than four years ago. The last time Republicans controlled both the White House and Congress was during the 109th Congress (2005-2006) when George W. Bush was President, Dennis Hastert (R-Illinois) was Speaker of the House, and Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) was Senate Majority Leader.

The new make-up of the Senate in the 115th Congress will be 48 Democrats and 52 Republicans. The failure by Democrats to gain control of the Senate is a bitter loss for the Democratic Party. A few short weeks ago Democrats were poised to pick up five to seven seats. Pollsters then revised estimates down to a four to six seat gain. By election day it was clear that the best outcome Democrats could hope for was a tied Senate, with Vice-President Elect Tim Kaine breaking a tie. At the end of the day, Democrats faced a catastrophic loss of the White House and a gain of only two seats in the Senate, the only consolation being no incumbent Democrat lost.

Depending on a few outstanding races, the make-up of House is 193 Democrats to 239 Republicans. There were few bright spots for Democrats in the House races. Democrats had a net gain of six seats, a far cry from the projected pickup of 10-20 seats. Democrats picked up Republican open seats in Florida-10; Nevada-03; Virginia-04; and defeated incumbents Republicans in the Florida-07; New Jersey-05; Florida-13; Illinois-10; Nevada-04; and New Hampshire-01 congressional districts. The situation was much better for Republicans who will enter the 115th Congress with more seats than they had following the 2014 elections.

President-elect Trump's Relationship with the New Congress

Republican control of both the Executive and Legislative branches of government does not guarantee the GOP will be unified, although the Republican leadership has pledged to work with

the new President-elect. Many analysts expect a “honeymoon” period as both branches attempt to work together; however, that honeymoon is not guaranteed to be automatic or long-lasting.

Trump’s relationship with Congress has no precedent. Unlike past presidents who either served in the Congress or at least were acquainted with congressional leaders, Trump’s relationships with these figures are minimal. Trump also has no previous experience working with institutional roadblocks to check his power unlike within the Trump Organization where his word was law. This could have major implications if the Trump Republican platform shows itself to have key differences with the Republican Leadership.

In addition, the 60-vote threshold in the Senate could hinder Trump’s legislative agenda. Under the Senate rules, 60 votes are needed to cut off debate on legislation or amendments being considered. If a member of the minority party is filibustering legislation, Republicans must get 60 votes to cut off debate. As the GOP has only 52 seats in the next Congress, the GOP would need support from eight Democrats to end debate on a legislative measure.

President-elect Trump said his top three priorities as president will be border security, the economy and healthcare reform, for which he is expected to get strong support from House and Senate Republicans. Congress has voted numerous times to repeal Obama Care but has been unsuccessful. With a Republican White House and Congress, repealing Obama Care is more than likely.

Additionally, there is considerable overlap between Trump and security-conscious Republicans on blocking the resettlement of Syrian refugees and backing out of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). Last September Trump said he would renegotiate the agreement. According to experts Trump has the authority to renegotiate the deal as the agreement is valid only as long as all parties adhere to it. Other experts disagree pointing out that the JCPOA is not a bilateral agreement between the US and Iran, but an international agreement negotiated by the P5+1 and US allies must be considered. If the US were to back out, in their opinion, the agreement would still be valid. Congress is expected to extend the Iran Sanctions Act, due to expire in December.

On Russia, Trump also could face problems with the hawks in Congress – like Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) – if he tries to seek some sort of rapprochement with Russia or form a partnership with Russia in Syria targeting ISIS while leaving Bashar al-Assad in power to continue his crimes against the Syrian people.

Differences with Congress on issues like tax reform and national security, are more a matter of degree rather than substance. Both sides will have to sit down and work out what is realistically achievable given public expectations.

However, on issues like social security, trade, and to some extent immigration, Trump has major differences with Senator Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) and Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin). Any disagreements he has on these agenda items could expose factional differences between pro-Trump and anti-Trump Republicans. For example, pulling out of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which has been signed, and supported by Ryan, but not yet ratified by Congress, has long been on Trump’s short list of specific

policy actions he would take as president. Trump's plan for the first 100 days in office is to withdraw from the TPP; and to also renegotiate or withdraw from NAFTA.

While the Republican Leadership has pledged to work with Trump, support for his candidacy from House Speaker Ryan and senior Senate Republicans such as Majority Leader McConnell, and Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) were lukewarm, at best. Assuming Ryan and Trump are able to mend their differences, Ryan could be a useful ally to Trump. Republicans must prove to Trump supporters that they understand and support Trump and his agenda. For now, Republican leaders have made peace with President-elect Trump. The question is how long the honeymoon will last?