



Election wrap-up

By Karl Anderson, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Director of Government Relations

| December 27, 2020

Joe Biden Headshot by White House

On 20 January, Joe Biden will be sworn in as the 46th president of the United States, assuming the presidency during a global pandemic and economic uncertainty. Unlike presidents of the recent past, he will not have the luxury of a Congress controlled by his own party. Control of the Senate is still in limbo, but Republicans are favored to narrowly hang on after the 5 January runoff of both Georgia Senate seats. The Senate is 50–48 in favor of the GOP, and Democrats would have to win both races to functionally control a tied Senate with Vice President–elect Kamala Harris serving as the tiebreaker. Regardless of who wins, it will be a very narrow majority with little margin for error.

The House will stay in Democratic hands, but in a surprise to election prognosticators, the GOP will increase their numbers having gained at least 10 seats. While Nancy Pelosi is poised to remain Speaker of the House, she will face a narrow majority, complicating

her legislative agenda.

If the Senate remains in Republican hands, much of a Biden legislative agenda is on life support. A huge stimulus package is likely out of reach, major climate legislation is unattainable, a deal on infrastructure is doable but harder to achieve, efforts to bolster the Affordable Care Act or expand health care will have to rely on executive action, and tax increases are certainly off the table.

In other words, do not expect enactment of big, sweeping legislative proposals.

Incrementalism, compromise, and bipartisanship will rule the day.

Agriculture Committee Changes

Three of the four longtime agriculture committee leaders who wrote the 2018 farm bill will not be returning to Congress in 2021.

Rep. Collin Peterson's 30-year run has come to an end after being defeated by Republican Michelle Fischbach. Peterson, a key ally of agriculture, has been atop the Agriculture Committee for 15 years as either chairman or ranking member. His defeat opened the door for David Scott (D-GA) to take the helm as the next chairman of the House Agriculture Committee.

Glenn Thompson (R-PA) will take over the top Republican spot with the retirement of House Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Mike Conaway (R-TX). Scott and Thompson have both held subcommittee leadership roles over their years of service on the committee.

On the Senate side, Chairman Pat Roberts (R-KS) is retiring at the end of the 116th Congress, creating an opening for the top spot on the Senate Agriculture Committee. The retirement of Roberts is a tremendous loss for the research community. He has

been a longtime champion of research and was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR). Sen. John Boozman (R-AK) is in line to be the next chairman.

Climate Change and Biden

Climate change is one of President-elect Biden's top priorities. The others are COVID-19, economic recovery, and racial equity. While he will not get much assistance from Congress, he can integrate climate into executive actions, the regulatory process, and agency policies. John F. Kerry has been named as Biden's climate envoy, and many of his cabinet picks are seen as key elements of a "climate administration." The USDA is poised to be a major player in Biden's climate push. As momentum builds around agriculture's potential to offset emissions by paying farmers to sequester carbon, USDA investments and policies to incentivize conservation will be a major focus. Farm groups and environmental NGOs are lining up in support of carbon markets that reward farmers for implementing climate-smart practices, and there is bipartisan congressional support. This is one area where the Biden administration could make significant progress.

[More news and perspectives](#)

[Back to issue](#)

[Back to home](#)

Text © . The authors. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Except where otherwise noted, images are subject to copyright. Any reuse without express permission from the copyright owner is prohibited.