

117th Congress sworn in Sunday amid pandemic

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The 117th Congress was officially sworn in on Sunday, bringing an influx of new lawmakers to Capitol Hill amid the ongoing pandemic.

The Constitution calls for Congress to convene on January 3 at noon ET -- the reason for the rare Sunday session. Newly elected and returning members took the oath of office and the full House of Representatives voted along party lines to reelect Nancy Pelosi as House Speaker.

House Democrats kept control of the House in the November elections, but will now have a narrower majority after suffering a string of losses, despite projections that they would win more seats. House Republicans, meanwhile, outperformed expectations and are now poised to add a significant number of GOP women to their ranks in the new Congress. In the Senate, the balance of power still has yet to be decided with all eyes on a pair of Senate runoff elections taking place in Georgia on January 5 that will determine which party controls the chamber.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell welcomed all senators after they had been sworn in Sunday.

"To say the 117th Congress convenes at a challenging time would indeed be an understatement," McConnell said. "From political division to a deadly pandemic to adversaries around the world, the hurdles before us are many and they are serious. But there's also plenty of reason for hope. An optimistic forward-looking ... spirit has been one of our country's most distinctive calling cards since our very earliest days. And with safe and effective vaccines rolling out across our nation every day, I'd say 2021 looks bright already."

Pelosi spoke shortly after being reelected to the position of Speaker, saying, "we begin this new Congress during a time of extraordinary difficulty," in a nod to the ongoing coronavirus crisis facing the nation.

"Our most urgent priority will continue to be defeating the coronavirus. And defeat it, we will," Pelosi said.

The incoming class of freshmen includes high-profile Democrats and Republicans who have already gained national attention even before setting foot in Congress.

In the House, a slate of progressive Democrats who took down incumbents in primary challenges will be part of the new Congress, including Cori Bush of Missouri, who ousted congressman Lacy Clay in a major upset and Jamaal Bowman of New York, who defeated the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Eliot Engel.

Other incoming members who already have a national profile include Republicans Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who became widely known for a track record of incendiary rhetoric and ties to the baseless QAnon conspiracy theory, and Ronny Jackson of Texas, President Donald Trump's former chief physician.

In the Senate, former Gov. John Hickenlooper is the new Democratic senator from Colorado and former Auburn University football coach Tommy Tuberville is the newest Republican senator from Alabama.

Trump praises Tuberville after Alabama GOP senator-elect leaves open objecting to election results January 6

Alex Padilla will be another new senator in the new Congress after California Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed him to fill Vice President-elect Kamala Harris' Senate seat. Harris and President-elect Joe Biden will be sworn in on January 20 during the presidential inauguration.

Mark Kelly, a retired Navy captain and NASA astronaut, a new Democratic senator from Arizona, was sworn in during the month of December after winning a special election.