

# Cracks in Republican unity between Trump and Congress are already beginning to show

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*Donald Trump will enter the White House this Friday facing a Republican-controlled House and Senate. [Michele L. Swers](#) looks ahead to what we might expect from President Trump and the 115th Congress, writing that while they may initially seek areas of common ground, clashes on issues like the repeal and replacement of Obamacare, foreign policy, and infrastructure spending may mean a rocky relationship lays ahead.*



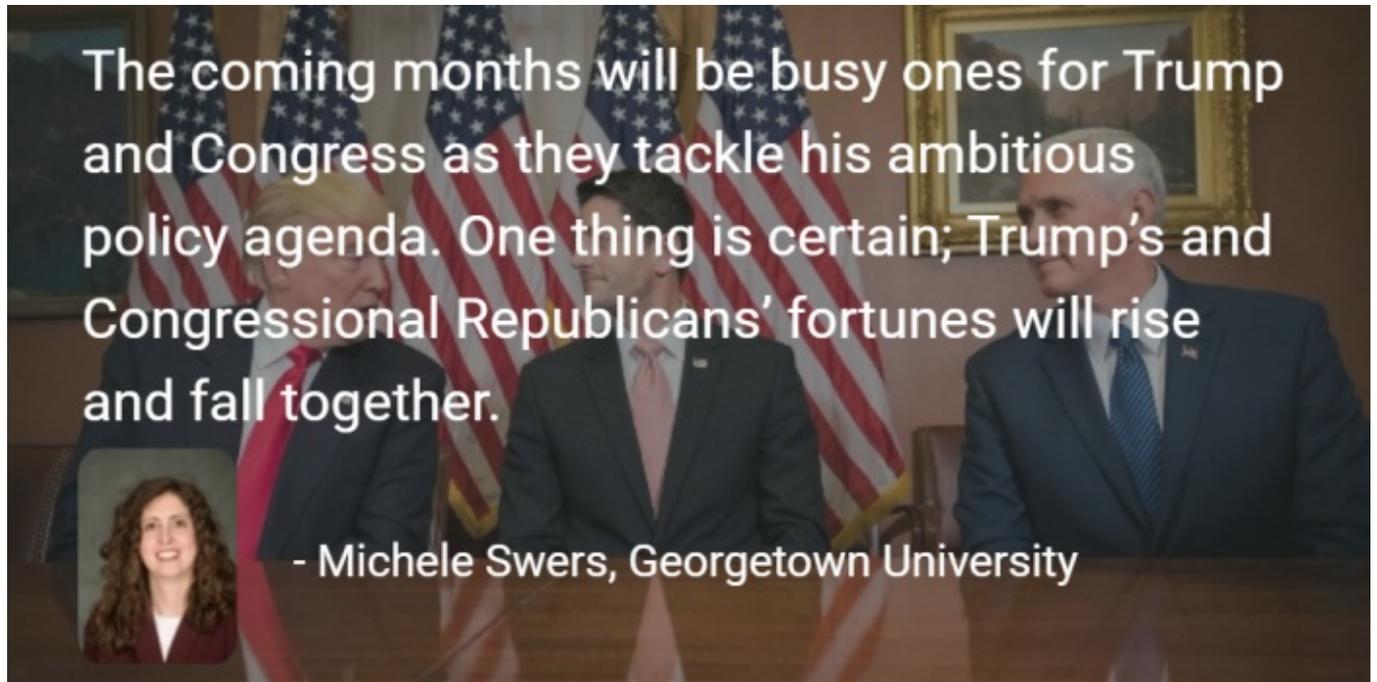
This Friday, January 20<sup>th</sup>, Donald Trump will be inaugurated as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Trump was elected on a platform of change in which he promised to shake up the Washington establishment. In return the establishment, in the form of the most recent Republican presidents George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush, and 2012 presidential nominee Mitt Romney refused to endorse his candidacy. The congressional leadership House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senate leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) were visibly uncomfortable with Trump's candidacy throughout the election and often tried to distance themselves from his rhetoric and policy positions. Speaker Ryan and the House Republican leadership developed an alternate policy agenda, "[A Better Way](#)" to contrast their policy vision with both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. How will the populist President Trump govern with the Republican-controlled Congress? Initially, Congress and the President will seek common ground and focus on areas of agreement. However, Congress and the new president may clash when Trump chafes against the complexity and gridlock of the legislative process and disagreements over policy details begin to emerge.

Congressional Republicans have strong incentives to cooperate with President Trump. With unified control of Congress and the Presidency, Republicans are in full control of the levers of power in Washington. With Barack Obama as president, Republicans knew their priorities like repealing Obamacare, rolling back onerous regulations on business, and reducing government spending would not survive a presidential veto. Therefore, they could pass strongly conservative bills that drew a contrast with Democrats, but did not bear the responsibility for governing and implementing these ideas. As Donald Trump takes office, the president and Congress will be expected to govern. Republicans will be blamed if for example, large numbers of citizens lose their health insurance when Obamacare is repealed.

Individual Republican members have good reason to worry. American politics is increasingly nationalized making it harder for members to develop a personal vote in which a member cultivates a reputation with constituents that insulates the member from changes in national party fortunes. Indeed, for the first time in 2016 there was [no split ticket voting](#) for the Senate, meaning that all states that voted for Hillary Clinton for president sent a Democrat to the Senate and all the states that supported Donald Trump also voted for a Republican senator. Moreover, there is a long history of voters punishing the incumbent president by voting against his party in the midterm election. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama lost 52 and 63 House seats respectively and their congressional majorities in the first midterm elections of their presidencies. While the 1994 and 2010 elections were wave elections which saw catastrophic losses for the Democratic president, since FDR only Bill Clinton in 1998 and George W. Bush in 2002 saw their party [gain House seats in a midterm election](#).

Since Donald Trump comes to the presidency after a deeply divisive campaign in which he won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote, Republicans will want to score some early policy victories by focusing on areas of agreement. Obamacare repeal was a central promise of Trump's campaign and Republicans in Congress have [voted to repeal Obamacare more than 60 times](#) since they regained control of the House in 2010. Corporate and

individual tax reform is another Trump priority that is part of Paul Ryan's Better Way agenda and has been a longstanding goal of congressional Republicans. House Ways and Means chair, Kevin Brady (R-TX) is busy analyzing and drafting proposals that will [overhaul the tax code](#) in a way that Republicans hope will stimulate job creation. To help President Trump eliminate onerous regulations on business, Congress plans to utilize the [Congressional Review Act](#) to reverse regulations passed in the last months of the Obama administration including new overtime pay rules and various environmental guidelines.



Meanwhile in the Senate, Republicans are also swiftly moving through the hearings process for President Trump's cabinet appointees. Because Democrats [eliminated the filibuster](#) on executive branch nominees and lower court judges in 2013, Donald Trump's cabinet appointees have a smoother road to confirmation. Indeed, without the need to capture Democratic support, Trump was able to appoint more conservative nominees knowing he only needs Republican senators to confirm his picks. Despite Democratic objections to Treasury nominee [Steve Mnuchin's](#) Wall Street ties and connections to the home mortgage crisis, Labor Secretary nominee [Andrew Puzder's](#) rejection of minimum wage increases and equal pay proposals, and Attorney General nominee [Jeff Sessions'](#) record on civil rights and immigration, Republicans' 53 vote majority should ensure their confirmation. If Democrats try to filibuster Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Republicans will likely eliminate the filibuster on high court nominations to assure confirmation. Nominating a strong conservative will garner good will with the Republican base.

Even with progress on so many fronts, cracks in Republican unity are already evident. Republicans 53 vote margin in the Senate means they cannot afford to lose many senators in confirmation votes. Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson's close associations with Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump's expressed desire for a closer relationship with Russia has raised the ire of hawkish Republican senators including [John McCain \(AZ\)](#), [Lindsay Graham \(SC\)](#), and [Marco Rubio \(FL\)](#). Rubio's tough questioning of Tillerson at the confirmation hearing fueled speculation about whether he would vote against him when the Foreign Relations Committee meets to consider whether to send the nomination to the Senate floor.

On the legislative front, Republicans are divided on both a timeline for repealing and replacing Obamacare and the details of replacement legislation. Congressional leaders originally discussed passing a repeal and delaying the replacement. However, several [Republican legislators expressed discomfort](#) with the timeline fearing that constituents would be thrown off their insurance and insurers would abandon the market without an idea of the parameters of a replacement plan. Donald Trump has increased pressure on Congress to find a replacement by promising that repeal and replacement will be almost simultaneous.

Budget politics will quickly become a flashpoint as Congress must [pass a new budget and raise the debt ceiling](#) in March. Donald Trump has promised infrastructure spending that will divide Republicans over its impact on the deficit. He also wants to greatly increase defense spending, a proposal that will pit Republican [defense hawks against budget hawks](#), particularly Freedom Caucus members who to date have insisted on cutting government spending across the board. Trump's trade policies will also divide Republicans. Speaker Ryan has already publicly stated his opposition to [Trump's border tax](#), a proposal to increase tariffs on companies that leave the United States but still want to do business here. In a recent town hall, he distanced himself from some of Trump's most controversial immigration proposals, such as a [mass deportation force](#).

The coming months will be busy ones for Trump and Congress as they tackle his ambitious policy agenda. One thing is certain; Trump's and Congressional Republicans' fortunes will rise and fall together.

Featured [image](#) credit: *By Caleb Smith; Office of the Speaker of the House [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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