

Webinar Highlights from "Making Sense of the 118th Congress: What's Happened and What to Expect"

MONIQUE NEWTON | NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

On January 25, 2023, APSA hosted a webinar featuring Congressional politics scholars to reflect on the dynamics of the 2022 midterm elections and their aftermath. This includes the tumultuous House Speaker vote, the first few weeks of the new Congress term, and critical areas to watch over the next two years. The APSA Congressional Fellowship Program Director, Meghan McConaughy, moderated the virtual panel. The panelists included Jason Casellas (University of Houston), Matthew Green (Catholic University of America), Michael Minta (University of Minnesota), Molly Reynolds (The Brookings Institution), and Catherine Wineinger (Western Washington University). The webinar aimed to provide insight into what is currently happening in Congress. The discussion lasted an hour and twenty minutes. In the first portion, the panelists took turns responding to what we have seen and expect to see next in Congress. The remainder of the webinar was dedicated to answering questions from the virtual audience. The panelists discussed various topics ranging from diversity in Congress, the battle for Speaker of the House, and the legislative implications of the new Congress.

MOST DIVERSE CONGRESS EVER

Cathy Wineinger kicked off the panel by highlighting that the 118th Congress is the most diverse regarding gender and race. According to panelist Jason Casellas, today 133 of the 534 members of the House and Senate are racial and ethnic minorities. Ten years ago, that number was 67. We have seen a gradual increase in racial and ethnic minorities in Congress as both parties have made significant efforts to diversify their candidates in recent elections. For the first time in the history of Congress, over ten percent of Congress is Latino. Michael Minta



Monique Newton is a PhD Candidate in political science at Northwestern University studying poor Black political behavior, trauma, and collective memory in American politics.

notes the partisan dimension of this diversity as Republicans are diversifying somewhat, but it is still not to the extent of the Democratic Party. This is the first-time members of racial and ethnic minorities hold such high positions in the Democratic party, such as Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries

who is Black, and Democratic Caucus Chairman Pete Aguilar, who is Latino.

Republican women have begun to talk about their gender as an asset to the party. Recall that 2020 was the year of Republican women when we saw a record number of Republican women get elected. There were a record number of Republican women running for office in 2022, but the partisan gap between Republican women and Democratic women is still huge. In the House, Democratic women make up 42% of the party, whereas House Republican women make up 15%. Cathy Wineinger highlighted the racial and ideological diversity among Republican women. Cathy is curious to see whether Republican women can work together in any way in policy and recruiting other women candidates.

Increases in diversity have not occurred in a vacuum. Molly Reynolds noted that high levels of diversity have come in conjunction with high turnover in the House, which has enormous ramifications for committee chair positions (which are historically given to more senior members). Michael Minta highlighted that this rising diversity has occurred in an era of increasing polarization, raising exciting challenges. Minta noted he would be paying extra attention to efforts by conservatives to discredit the institutions as Congress become more racially diverse.

BATTLE FOR SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

The battle that took place for the Speaker of the House was memorable for several reasons. It was the first time in a century that an election for House Speaker took multiple ballots to complete. It required a remarkable number of ballots—fifteen, cast over several days—to select Kevin McCarthy, the Republican nominee. And it was shown live on television, allowing citizens to see their representatives conversing, bargaining, and even threatening each other.

Matthew Green argued that the lengthy and contentious process will not necessarily lead to a weaker speakership for McCarthy. In Green's view, the crux of the matter is what McCarthy gave in exchange for these votes. To win the Speakership, McCarthy made numerous concessions, such as giving significant committee assignments to dissenters, promising to bring specific conservative bills to the floor, and reducing the threshold needed to force the House to vote on whether to remove McCarthy as speaker. In particular, McCarthy appointed three dissenting Republicans to the Rules Committee, the committee that determines what bills and amendments come to the House

floor, which could significantly impact the House's agenda.

Given these deals and the small size of the Republican majority, Green plans to keep a close eye on whether McCarthy can keep his caucus together as the time passes. Like Green, Molly Reynolds drew attention to both policy and process ramifications of McCarthy's battle for Speaker. However, Reynolds argued that the struggle for Speaker was more consequential for the process than the policy side.

LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Finally, as Michael Minta highlighted, we are seeing increases in diversity but also starting to see more conflict on things that typically pass. Michael Minta questioned the substantive impact that arises from increased levels of descriptive representation. Will you see more action on issues that minorities and marginalized groups care about? If you are going to have all these levels of diversity, will it bring about meaningful legislation? This rising diversity has occurred in an era of increasing polarization, raising exciting challenges. Congress consistently has fights on things that must pass, such as raising the debt ceiling. Molly Reynolds discussed the role of very narrow majorities in the House and the Senate. These majorities have significant consequences for policymaking overall and how the parties will use their majorities to accomplish something.

All the panelists are invested in understanding what bills Congress can pass. There is little hope for real legislative progress in this Congress as the divided government will make it difficult. The debt ceiling and the farm bill are legislation that Molly Reynolds foresees eventually passing. Jason Casellas noted that immigration would continue to be an issue Republicans will push in the House. We haven't had significant immigration reform in

the House arguably since 1986. Regarding classified documents, oversight and investigations will be essential issues in this Congress. The panel predicted that the Senate will spend most of the next two years on nominations.

CONCLUSION

The general trend of the 2022 election was that the Republicans were not doing as well as expected. Moving forward, the panelists will be looking at several areas. Jason Casellas questions whether the state of the economy has become less pivotal than in previous elections. He believes this trend will continue due to the close margin between parties in the Senate. Second, Michael Minta will be looking at the type of candidates running and paying attention to the kind of candidates and ideology being elected. The story on the Senate side is about candidate quality, as Dr. Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania and Hershel Walker in Georgia gave trouble to Republican hopes of gaining a few seats. Finally, Matt Green is highly skeptical that Congress will work along the executive branch to pass legislation differently than in recent years and expects legislative gridlock to occur.

Molly Reynolds will be looking to see if the pragmatic arm of the Republican party stands up to the radical arm of the party. This did not happen during the battle for Speaker. She will be paying attention to the tactics Republican-controlled committees try to use. Focusing on the staff level, Catherine Wineiger will be looking at organizing efforts among progressive staff. Last year the House passed H.R. 1096, officially granting House staffers unionization protections. Lastly, the panelists noted that Democrats have more messaging power than before and will look to see how they use it in the 118th Congress. ■