

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

How Will California Be Affected If Republicans Gain Control of Congress?

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October 30, 2022

California's political clout could be on the brink of a seismic shift. If, as expected, Republicans win control of the House on Nov. 8, some of the state's most powerful political figures — think Democrats — would see their influence greatly diminished. Most notably, of course, is Nancy Pelosi, who has wielded considerable influence as the House speaker. California is a decidedly Democratic state and Pelosi has been a key force in pushing through party objectives.

She's far from alone. A long list of Golden State Democrats who now preside over or are senior members of important congressional panels won't be doing that anymore. That includes Central Valley Reps. Ami Bera, John Garamendi, Doris Matsui and Jim Costa as well as Central Coast Rep. Salud Carbajal. Bottom line: Their ability to pass legislation on such party policy priorities as climate change, or steer money toward concerns such as roads, will become a lot tougher.

"It diminishes," said Ross Baker, professor of American politics at Rutgers University, of California's clout if Republicans control the House. How likely is this shift? Republicans need a net gain of five seats nationwide to win control of the House for the two years starting in January. Independent analysts and polling suggest a pickup of eight to 25. California now has 42 Democrats and 11 Republicans in its House delegation — the state loses a seat next year because of population shifts — and many of those Democrats have been around long enough to possess ample power.

THE DEMOCRATIC SETBACK "The really big thing is the loss of Pelosi," Baker said. "So much legislation is written in the leadership suite." The San Francisco Democrat has been the House Democratic leader since 2003, and speaker in eight of those years. Californians chair four powerful committees: Maxine Waters at Financial Services, Mark Takano at Veterans Affairs, Zoe Lofgren at Administration and Adam Schiff at Intelligence. Locally, Bera, D-Sacramento, chairs a subcommittee on Asian and nonproliferation issues. Matsui, D-Sacramento, is a senior member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which writes health care, environment and business-related bills.

Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, heads a subcommittee on military readiness. Costa, D-Fresno, heads the livestock and foreign agriculture subcommittee, and Carbajal, D-Santa Barbara, chairs the Coast Guard panel. What is unlikely to change much is how Congress responds to state emergencies or aid to programs in need. That is particularly so because the most likely Republican

replacement for Pelosi is another Californian, Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield. “Having the speaker from the state can be pretty helpful,” said Christian Grose, academic director of the University of Southern California’s Schwarzenegger Institute.

McCarthy would be expected to help the state deal with disasters such as wildfires, earthquakes or other emergencies. Where Democratic influence could wane, experts said, is in the distribution of money for projects involving roads or schools. CALIFORNIA’S LOSSES On broader, more ideologically driven issues, differences are likely to be apparent. This summer’s Inflation Reduction Act, which passed with no House Republican support, had billions of dollars aimed at encouraging people to switch to cleaner energy devices. Last year’s \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, which provided funding to repair and build roads and bridges, received only 13 House Republican votes.

If they win control of the House, Republicans in January would confront a divided government. The current 50-50 Senate could remain Democratic, and Joe Biden will still be president, meaning it would take two-third majorities in each chamber to overcome vetoes. As a result, “You’ll find little big legislation,” said John Fortier, senior fellow at Washington’s American Enterprise Institute. But moving even less ambitious bills will likely be tough for California Democrats.

“You had a speaker who has been powerful for a long time,” said Fortier, someone who was close to Californians and understood the state’s politics. While McCarthy is a lifelong, fourth-generation Californian, a graduate of California State University Bakersfield, analysts still see a state congressional delegation dominated by Democrats. And the state’s two U.S. senators are likely to be Democrats. Because so many of the more senior Democrats are from California, “they now wield a lot of power,” said Grose. “This would be a big change.”

Consider: McCarthy and his allies will now set the policy agenda. And significantly, McCarthy’s most senior and powerful party allies will not be from California — or have much, if any, interest in pushing policy that resonates with the majority of California voters. REPUBLICAN AMBITIONS It’s unlikely that California Republicans will have the same clout in so many different areas that California Democrats now have. Most of the state’s Republicans are fairly new to Congress, where seniority matters, and few are close to the hardcore conservatives with the most influence in the party.

There is one likely notable exception: Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, who’s now seeking an eighth term. He is currently the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee’s immigration subcommittee, putting him in line to chair that panel if Republicans win the House. McClintock is also a senior member of the Natural Resources Committee. When the GOP last controlled Congress from 2011 to 2019, he chaired subcommittees at different times on national parks and forests, and also water, oceans and wildlife.

He won’t discuss the future at this point. “He intends to continue his work on budget reform, forest management and immigration,” said Jennifer Cressy, McClintock’s spokeswoman. “In what capacity will be decided after the election.” McClintock has been a consistent advocate for tougher measures to curb undocumented immigrants from crossing the border.

Biden, the congressman said last month, “sent a clear and unmistakable message heard around the world: America is now a nation without borders.” Some other Californians could move into positions of power. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-San Marcos, chaired the Oversight and Reform Committee from 2011 to 2015 and is now the top Republican on Judiciary’s courts subcommittee. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Oroville, is the top Republican on the agriculture committee’s panel on conservation and forestry. Reps. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, David Valadao, R-Hanford, and Mike Garcia, R-Santa Clarita, are members of the appropriations committee, which writes spending legislation. Calvert is also the top Republican on the defense subcommittee.

A Republican-run House is also expected to pursue a far different tax and spending path. California may not see a huge difference in federal funding for projects such as roads or schools — not with Biden as president — but could see less money for more innovative efforts. The state’s climate change initiatives, for instance, may not receive the support Democrats have provided.

Three of the nine Democrats on the House Climate Crisis Committee are Californians; none of the Republicans are. Republicans are also talking about extending the Trump-era tax cuts, which lowered income tax rates across the board but provided big breaks for business and wealthier taxpayers. Those tax cuts passed in 2017 without a single Democratic vote.

That, though, could benefit affluent sectors of California, whose wealthier residents pay some of the nation’s highest tax rates. Many Democrats have sought to increase tax rates on long-term capital gains. Republicans have not. Chris Edwards, a fiscal policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that Republican position could play well in places such as Silicon Valley. “Capital gains are the reward for investing in particularly risky startups,” he said. “That’s what Silicon Valley is all about.

Thus, increasing capital gains taxes would reduce investment in technology startups. It would undermine the Silicon Valley model. “So I think if McCarthy becomes speaker, Silicon Valley can breathe a sigh of relief in terms of higher capital gains taxes,” said Edwards, a former senior economist for Congress’ Joint Economic Committee.

Democrats’ view of all this? It’s a moot point. They’re not going to lose the House, they say. “While Republicans use Americans’ struggles as a political ploy, California Democrats are delivering historic reforms to lower energy and health care costs, and protect Americans’ fundamental rights.

That’s why California voters will send Democrats back to Congress this November,” said Madison Mundy, spokeswoman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. “Democrats are going to hold the majority in the House,” she said, “and California is a critical part of that strategy.” Perhaps, but conventional wisdom would suggest a different reality — one with a post Nov. 8 future marked by diminished political clout in California.