

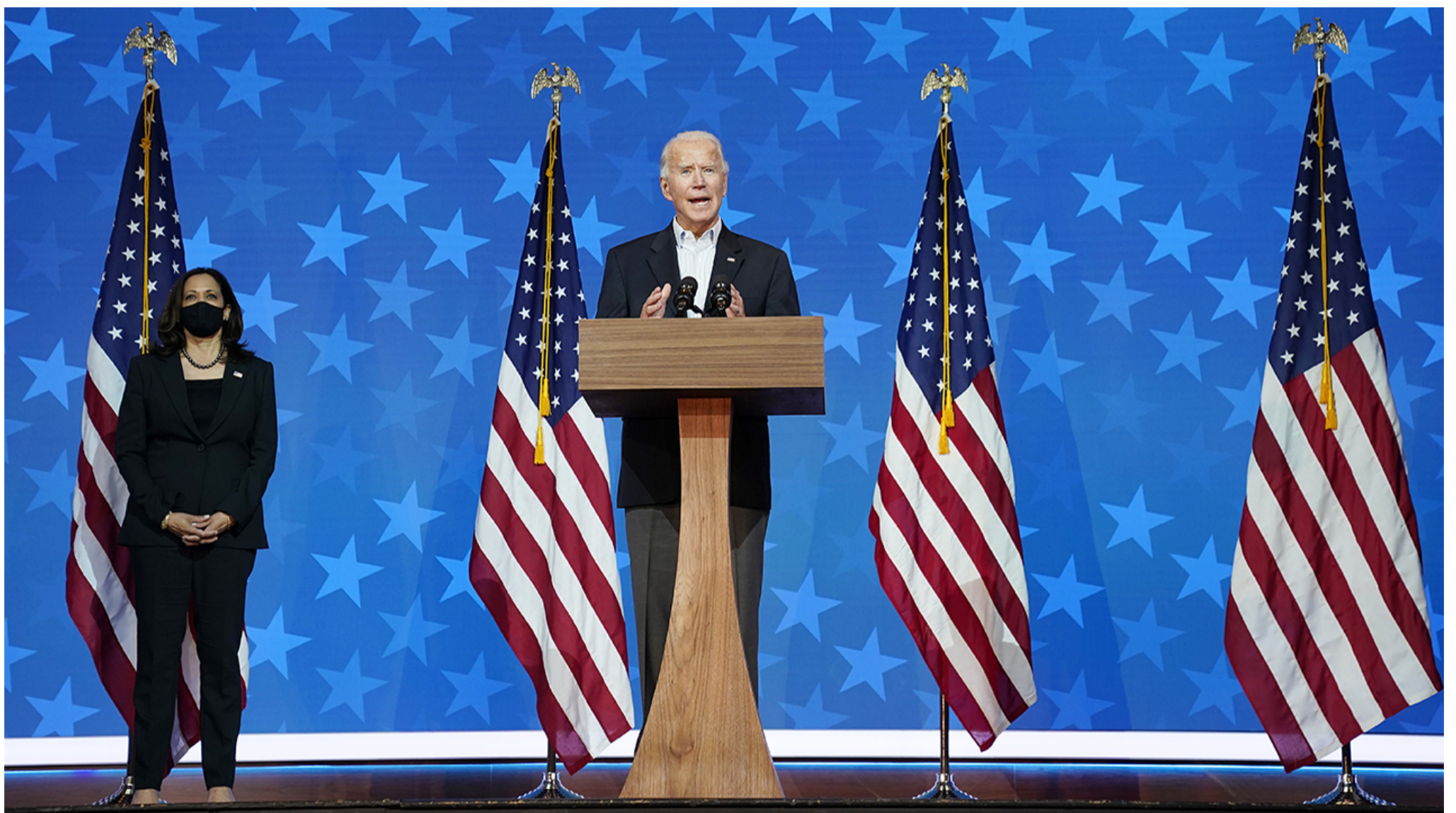
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SCIENCEINSIDER SCIENCE AND POLICY

Biden has a bold agenda, but a divided Congress could constrain him

The new president will likely cancel a host of Trump executive orders

9 NOV 2020 • BY JEFFREY MERVIS



President-elect Joe Biden (right) and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

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Most U.S. researchers and environmental activists were ecstatic when Joe Biden emerged as the winner of the U.S. presidential election on Saturday. They expect him to reverse a host of Trump administration policies they oppose and push for new steps to fight climate change.

But when Biden is sworn in on 20 January 2021, his ability to advance an ambitious agenda will be constrained by his likely status as the first president in more than 30 years to take office without his party controlling both chambers of Congress. Republicans are favored to preserve their majority in the Senate by winning at least one of the two runoff contests in Georgia, and Democrats will have a narrower majority in the new House of Representatives than during the previous 2 years.



Biden won't need a Democratic Congress to start to tackle some of his top priorities, including confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, for example, he named 13 researchers, physicians, and public health specialists to a [COVID-19 advisory board](#). "The advisory board will help shape my approach to managing the surge in reported infections; ensuring vaccines are safe, effective, and distributed efficiently, equitably, and free; and protecting at-risk populations," the president-elect said in a statement.

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Once sworn in, Biden will also be able to move quickly to undo an array of executive orders issued by President Donald Trump over the past 4 years. The president-elect has said he will rejoin the Paris climate pact on his first day in office and cancel orders that weakened environmental regulations and barred immigrants from many majority-Muslim nations. His new administration will also likely suspend work on proposed regulations it opposes, including several weakening pollution controls. The halt will effectively kill them, but it could take years to reverse regulations that could be finalized before Trump leaves office, including one that would limit the kinds of scientific studies that can be used to support new environmental regulations.

Biden will also have substantial opportunity to reverse the "denigration of expertise" that permeated the Trump presidency, says science policy specialist David Hart of George Mason University. The outgoing administration's disregard for evidence-based policy resulted in attempts to undermine the accuracy of this year's census, politicize climate and hurricane forecasts, and sideline scientific advisory panels. It also triggered a "crisis of confidence" at federal regulatory agencies, says Daniel Sarewitz of Arizona State University, Tempe.

To restore that confidence, Biden will likely populate his administration with well-respected researchers. Most science agencies will be getting new leaders, although Sethuraman Panchanathan is only 5 months into a 6-year term as director of the National Science Foundation, and Francis Collins may be asked to extend his 11 years at the helm of the National Institutes of Health until the coronavirus pandemic is controlled.

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Biden's choice of a science adviser and head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy could send a key signal about the status of science in his administration. The scope of that job, now held by Kelvin Droegemeier, was greatly diminished under Trump.

A Republican majority in the Senate would pose a serious obstacle to Biden's campaign promises aimed at combating climate change, including a \$2 trillion green infrastructure initiative. Budget hawks in both parties are also expected to put pressure on their leaders to rein in spending after pandemic relief packages caused the federal deficit to skyrocket. Historically, however, Congress has backed increases in federal research spending even during periods of austerity.

A first look at Biden's priorities for science will come when the administration rolls out its 2021 budget request in February. Even before Biden is sworn in, however, leaders of the House and Senate have said they want to pass another pandemic relief bill, which could include tens of billions of dollars to help universities recover from the losses caused by shutting down campus labs in the spring.

Lawmakers must also decide whether to complete work on this year's annual budget. In July, the House approved two bills containing healthy boosts for several science agencies, and tomorrow the Senate will release its preliminary numbers. The alternative is to continue the current freeze on federal spending and leave the dealmaking to the new president and Congress.

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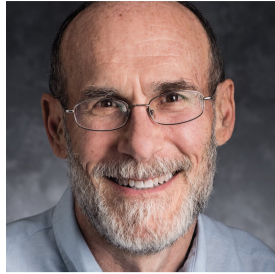
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Jeff Mervis tries to explain how government works to readers of *Science*.