Incoming lawmakers get taste of DC

More than 100 joined congressional ranks

Aysha Bagchi, Arit John, Bart Jansen and Zachary Schermele
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Sen.-elect Troy Jackson quickly learned just how much attention is lavished on new lawmakers when he arrived at the U.S. Capitol on Nov. 10.

The soon-to-be freshman Maine Democrat rode the electric train from the Russell Senate Office Building with a group of well-wishers and took pictures with them at the Capitol platform. Then there were more requests for pictures. Next, a family of tourists approached him to congratulate him on beating five-term GOP Sen. Susan Collins.

"Awesome," Jackson said, as the cameras snapped. "At this point, everything is going great, so I'm very excited."

A week after winning their elections, more than 100 new lawmakers have traded the campaign trail for the halls of Congress.

They're attending panels, meeting new colleagues and learning the ins and outs of how to set up a congressional office. They're making new friends, figuring out where they'll live when they're in Washington and how they'll split their time between the capital and their districts.

And sometimes they're just figuring out where to go next – literally and figuratively.

Democrat Cait Conley, an Army veteran who ousted Rep. Mike Lawler, R-New York, appeared to get lost while talking to a USA TODAY reporter in a House office building. After comparing her freshman orientation experience to the first week of school, her voice trailed off.

"Sorry, I'm actually trying to figure out how to get out of here," she said, before resolving to "follow the exit signs."



Sens.-elect Annie Andrews, D-South Carolina, left; James Talarico, D-Texas; and Troy Jackson, D-Maine, arrive at the U.S. Capitol for new-member orientation on Nov. 9. JIM WATSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Sen.-elect Abdul El-Sayed, D-Michigan, said he was still working on finding a place to stay in the nation's capital. ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS

Making friends early on

More than 100 newly elected members of Congress descended on the Capitol the week after the election for freshman orientation. The bulk of those new members are Democrats, who flipped 43 House seats and seven GOP-held Senate seats.

New friendships are already forming.

Jackson, a former state lawmaker and logger, said he was beginning to forge bonds with new colleagues, including Sens.-elect James Talarico of Texas and Sherrod Brown of Ohio. Brown may need the orientation least of all: he represented Ohio in the Senate for 18 years and is returning two years after losing his 2024 reelection.

"Heard a lot about him. Very excited. Another labor-oriented guy," Jackson said of Brown.

Sen.-elect Juliana Stratton, D-Illinois, noted that she and Sen.-elect Peggy Flanagan, D-Minnesota, both began serving as lieutenant governors of their respective states in 2019 before being elected to the U.S. Senate.

"It's great to have her here," Stratton said. "The entire class are not just brilliant and really just passionate about the issues in their communities, but they're also really good people."

Doing their homework

Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-Louisiana, who lost his May primary to Sen.-elect Julia Letlow, said he always passes along the same advice to new lawmakers: Get the best office you can. But the best advice he received as a new member was from former Rep. Jim McCrery, R-Louisiana.

"Show up, do your homework, and keep your word," Cassidy said. "If you do that, you'll have a good legislative career."

For some new members, the Capitol is a familiar place. Before he was elected to be the nonvoting delegate to Congress representing the District of Columbia, Robert White served as legislative counsel for his predecessor, outgoing Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. He said he's still listening for the nuggets of information he may not know.

"There's the surreal part where you walk up the Capitol steps into the House chamber, and I mean, it's amazing," White said. "Then there is the sort of new-kid orientation that's like school. This is how you hire staff. This is how you do your schedule. This is your budget. These are the ethics rules."

Rep.-elect Richard Ojeda, D-North Carolina, who defeated incumbent GOP Rep. Richard Hudson, described the first few days as "drinking from a fire hose."

"I am in awe of all of this," Ojeda said. "This is a position that's way bigger than I am, and that's my focus, is always making sure that I'm going to place the people of my district first."

Jasmine Clark, a Georgia state representative who won the state's 13th Congressional District, compared running a congressional office to operating a business. She and her peers are also figuring out the logistics of commuting back and forth between their districts and the Capitol.

"It just becomes a work-life-family balance that I am looking forward to at least trying to figure out," she said. "But I do know there's probably going to be a lot of figuring out happening over the next few months."

Figuring out where to stay while in Washington is high on new members' lists of priorities. Jackson said he's staying in a hotel with plans to look at places. Sen.-elect Abdul El-Sayed, D-Michigan, said "we're working on it." Sen.-elect Annie Andrews, D-South Carolina, said that's "tomorrow's project."

Nevada Democrat Teresa Benitez-Thompson, a mother of four who won a U.S. House seat that includes her home in Reno, said she plans to be a supercommuter.

"I'll be returning home to touch soil as much as I can," she said. "I would say grass, but we don't grow a lot of grass."

SEC enforcement activity plunged over past 2 years

Chris Prentice
REUTERS

NEW YORK – The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission said on Nov. 10 it brought 348 enforcement actions in fiscal 2026, the fewest cases since 1991, according to a Reuters review of agency statistics.

The agency's actions were down from 456 a year earlier, as the Wall Street watchdog said it levied nearly $1.1 billion in fines and other financial remedies. That was the lowest level of penalties it has imposed since 2008, on a non-inflation-adjusted basis, according to the Reuters review of figures published on the SEC's website.

The figures are likely to stoke concerns among Democrats and consumer advocacy groups that the agency, which oversees more than 30,000 brokers, funds and other financial firms, is dramatically stepping back from enforcement under President Donald Trump's administration.

Republican leaders, who took the helm of the SEC in January 2025, have generally argued that overly onerous enforcement stifles business and in the case of public corporations, punishes shareholders. Current SEC Chairman Paul Atkins, for example, has described its previous enforcement stance as opaque and unpredictable.

"The success of the SEC's enforcement program is ultimately measured by how effectively it advances the SEC's mission, protects investors, holds wrongdoers accountable, and strengthens confidence in our markets," Atkins said in a statement about the SEC's annual report. "Enforcement actions and financial remedies are important measures of activity, but they are not the only or most telling measures."

The total penalties levied in fiscal 2026 included $343 million in civil penalties and another $752 million in disgorgement of ill-gotten gains, the SEC said.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, who is seen as likely to lead the Senate Banking Committee next year when Democrats take control of Congress, expressed concern over the enforcement slowdown.



Current SEC Chairman Paul Atkins has said the agency's enforcement should focus more on bread-and-butter fraud. JIM WATSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES FILE

"The new Democratic majority in Congress will closely scrutinize whether the Atkins SEC is protecting the American people – or working for scammers and Trump's billionaire buddies on Wall Street," she said in a statement.

Atkins has said SEC enforcement should focus more on bread-and-butter fraud. In fiscal 2025, the SEC levied $17.9 billion in fines and other remedies largely on the back of a huge final judgment for a Ponzi scheme case brought in 2009. Activity and fines otherwise declined.

The agency's enforcement team went through upheaval during the first 18 months of Trump's second term, with staff leaving in droves and the enforcement director quitting just six months into the job. The staff exodus left the SEC with fewer resources to police Wall Street, though it has since hired for some positions.

New SEC Enforcement Director David Woodcock recently told Reuters in an interview that he is now "comfortable" with current staffing levels.

In remarks prepared for a Nov. 10 event at Fordham Law School, Woodcock said that "activity and effectiveness are not the same."

"Chairman Atkins has given us room to focus on strengthening the program rather than maximizing any single year's totals – an important opportunity we have seized upon," he said.

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