

Meet The New House Freshmen

Seven Farmers Aim To Make Their Marks On Washington

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Although the 112th Congress won't officially begin until January 3, 2011, the new freshman class of House members descended upon Washington this week, still buzzing with the energy and enthusiasm they rode throughout the mid-term election. Although a handful of races are still not finalized, it appears that there will be 93 new representatives. At least 80 of those are Republicans.

Despite all of the celebration and the hoopla, the reality of governance is just starting to set in. The "newbies" headed to the Capitol Visitor Center for their bipartisan freshman orientation and the very first order of business: sitting for a photo ID. Within just a few weeks, these freshman members will need to learn the ethics rules, figure out how to set up offices, select critically important staff members, and go to more meetings than they can likely count. And then there are the day-to-day decisions: Where to live? Where to eat? Where to take my dry cleaning?

Of the 80-plus incoming GOP freshmen in the House, dozens have served in state legislatures. But almost one-third have never served in any elective office in their lives. Presumptive House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) told incoming lawmakers during a welcome dinner in the Capitol that their diversity meant that they were truly representative of the people who had voted for them.

"This group includes seven farmers, six medical doctors, three car dealers, two funeral home directors, a former FBI agent, a pizza restaurant owner, and a Northwest Airlines pilot," he said. "And it includes no fewer than 20 veterans of our armed forces."

Beyond their broad range of careers, the new group will also be the most diverse GOP class in House history, with five new Latino members, two African-Americans and at least seven women adding to the ranks of the current Republican House.

"This truly is government of the people, by the people, for the people," said Boehner.

Media frenzy

Members of the media are working hard to get the first glimpse, and sometimes the first news "scoop" out of their mouths. South Dakota's newly elected Congressman Kristi Noem was swarmed by a crowd of about 24 journalists when she arrived for orientation this week, but she disappointed those hoping for a juicy quote.

"For the next two years, we'll try to be as effective as possible," Noem told the Washington Post.

Words like "effective", "efficient" and "austere" are likely to be heard more often as the new GOP leadership looks for ways to streamline the way the House does business and reduce federal spending. Already under discussion: scheduling sessions so that members would be in Washington for an entire week, rather than starting legislative work on Tuesday and ending Thursday – as they often do now. This type of scheduling change would allow members to be in Washington for a full week and be in their districts the next, making it easier to schedule committee and constituent meetings.

It's still too early to tell whether or not members will win their favorite committees, but you will likely see a lot of new faces when the House Agriculture Committee convenes next year. Fourteen Democrats on the Agriculture Committee lost, so they've only got 11 or 12 of their 28 members who are even coming back to the Congress (depending on the outcome for Rep. Costa in California).

On the Republican side, Kansas Rep. Jerry Moran ran for Senate and won. Seventee of the 18 GOP members could be coming back, however, there are expected to be many vacancies current GOP members move to other committees like Ways & Means or Appropriations.

Many of the newly elected farmers are interested in serving on the House Agriculture Committee. Here's a rundown:

Kristi Noem, South Dakota's AL. The 38-year-old mother of three has worked as a farmer, rancher, hunting lodge owner and restaurant manager. Since 2007, she's served in the South Dakota House and as assistant majority leader since 2009. After knocking out the incumbent, Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, for South Dakota's at-large House seat, she's expected to have a high-profile position within the GOP freshman class. A lifelong rancher, Noem says she would be interested in pursuing seats on the Energy and Commerce and Agriculture committees.

Stephen Fincher, Tennessee 8th. The seventh-generation cotton, corn, soybeans and wheat farmer, who never attended college and has never held elective office, captured more than 60 percent of the vote using the slogan: "Plow Congress." The 37-year old Fincher lives in the Frog Jump community of Crockett County beside his father and brother. "The Fincher Family," a singing ministry started by his grandmother, has performed at over 2,000 community events in the last decade. Fincher is interested in seats on the Small Business, Armed Services and Agriculture committees.

Tim Huelskamp, Kansas 1. After leaving his family's farm near Fowler, Kansas, Huelskamp pursued a social science education from the College of Sante Fe in 1991 and received his Ph.D in political science and agricultural policy from the American University in 1995. The Kansas Republican worked as a teacher, budget and legislative analyst, before settling back on the farm. This father of four served in the Kansas Senate since 1997 and won the "Big First" after Rep. Jerry Moran stepped down to run for the U.S. Senate.

Vicky Hartzler, Missouri 4. Hartzler rode a GOP wave across the Fourth District to unseat Armed Services Chairman Ike Skelton, a 17-term Democrat. She, her husband and daughter farm near Harrisonville, Missouri, where they also own two Case-IH farm equipment dealerships. Hartzler served as a teacher and from 1995-2001, a Missouri House member. With her largely agricultural district including Fort Leonard Wood and Whiteman Air Force Base, she is interested in serving on both Agriculture and Armed Services committees.

Bob Gibbs, Ohio 22. Republican Bob Gibbs raises corn, soybeans and owns a property management company near Lakeville, Ohio. The well-known state legislator defeated Rep. Zack Space in this mostly rural district which covers eastern and southern Ohio. With his background as a farmer and small-business owner, Gibbs says he hopes to serve on the Agriculture and Energy and Commerce committees. His resume is filled with ag affiliations, including serving as President of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, board member of the Ohio Cooperative Council, President of the Holmes County Extension Advisory Committee and supervisor for the Holmes County Soil & Water Conservation Service.

Jeff Denham, California 19. This self-described fiscal conservative owns an almond orchard in California's Central Valley and also operates Denham Plastics, a leading supplier of reusable containers in the agriculture industry. With his agricultural background and experience dealing with water supply issues, Denham would like to land a spot on the Natural Resources Committee. As a veteran who served in the Air Force during Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, he's also interested in Armed Services.

Marlin Stutzman, Indiana 3. As a fourth generation family farmer, Marlin had been co-owner of Stutzman Farms with his father since he was 17 years old. Later on, he helped build a farm trucking company and has a strong interest in both agriculture and small business issues. He served eight years as an Indiana state legislator and co-sponsored legislation offering tax credits to bio-fuel producers which helped to bring 12 new bio-fuel plants to Indiana. Unlike most freshmen, Stutzman will take office almost immediately. He simultaneously won both the special election and the race for a full term in the 112th Congress. Δ

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