

What a Democratic House Means for Federal Technology Programs

New committee leadership will oversee investments in AI and cybersecurity programs.

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After winning control of the House of Representatives for the first time in eight years, congressional Democrats are set to take over the technology committees and subcommittees that hold significant influence over the direction of federal information technology initiatives.

Issues ranging from health care to immigration to infrastructure, are getting most of the attention, but the new sheriffs with a say in oversight and funding could have an impact on current federal IT priorities, such as IT modernization, the shift to cloud computing, the amplified emphasis on cybersecurity, and the pursuit of artificial intelligence.

What could agencies expect?

At least one key subcommittee could stay the course on IT initiatives, even while the new Democratic House challenges the Trump administration on a host of other issues. Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Ill., ranking member and likely candidate to take the chair of the House [Oversight Subcommittee on IT](#), said she doesn't expect a major change in cybersecurity policy from the current Congress, and has supported other priorities such as modernization and research into AI.

Kelly and Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., have worked with current chair Will Hurd, R-Texas, on IT-related issues, and Kelly said she expects that bipartisan efforts within the subcommittee will continue, regardless of who holds the chair.

AI Investment

In September, Kelly and Hurd together issued a white paper, titled "[Rise of the Machines](#)," that called for increased R&D funding for AI, investment in AI-related education and training, and a regulatory framework that addresses concerns such as privacy and potential risks to public safety.

But Connolly, who is considered another candidate for the IT subcommittee chair though more likely to head the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Operations, also said he plans to challenge the administration on its approach to modernization and other IT matters.

"From the establishment of the Office of American Innovation headed by his son-in-law [Jared Kushner] to the President's Management Agenda, the Trump administration has produced a lot of administrative churn on federal IT," Connolly wrote in a statement to Bloomberg Government. "It is past time to assess whether these efforts are working."

Potential challenges notwithstanding, the federal government's IT modernization efforts, which have the backing of the [President's Management Agenda](#), have mostly received bipartisan support from Congress, in terms of legislation. The question has been around where the money will come from.

The goals of modernization are embodied in the [Modernizing Government Technology Act](#) (MGT), which became law a year ago after being tacked onto the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. The bill was championed in the House by Hurd, with support from Kelly and Connolly. In the Senate, MGT was pushed by Sens. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., and Tom Udall, D-N.M.

MGT calls for enhancing cybersecurity and boosting the efficiency of IT systems by improving, replacing or just getting rid of legacy systems, and places an emphasis on moving existing systems to the cloud. But questions about funding modernization have circulated from the beginning.

Technology Modernization Fund

Agencies [compete for modernization funds](#), pitching their programs for a slice of the \$100 million Congress allocated in March for the Technology Modernization Fund (TMF), which is managed by the General Services Administration. Funding approvals are made by the TMF Board, established by the Office of Management and Budget.

To date, the board has awarded a total of \$45 million to modernization projects being undertaken by the departments of Agriculture (USDA), Energy (DoE), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Nine agencies had applied in that first round. Agencies also are expected to create their own working capital funds for modernization, by reinvesting savings from their technology initiatives. Whether a Democratic House can provide more funding remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, OMB Acting Director Margaret Weichert said recently that workforce issues also have been an impediment to modernization. A Democratic House is expected to support protections for federal employees against pay cuts, harsh disciplinary actions and other measures.

Although, as the MGT points out, cloud computing is tied to modernization, Congress also has looked into some large, individual cloud acquisitions, such as the Department of Defense's \$10 billion [Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure](#) (JEDI) cloud contract, with the 2019 NDAA requiring a detailed description of the cloud transition, regular updates on progress, and a good reason why DoD's plan to award the deal to a single vendor complies with the idea of a full and open competition and how it will allow for introducing new technologies during the contract's 10-year duration. Two GOP House representatives in October requested a DoD Inspector General's investigation of JEDI.

Federal IT priorities are set by the White House, and Chris Liddell, deputy chief of staff for policy coordination, said recently he doesn't expect policies to change with the new Congress. But a lot rides on funding, including Congress' ability to pass budgets from year to year, rather than relying on continuing resolutions.

Uncertainty around budgets can leave agencies gun-shy about taking on large modernization projects. Democrats, like Republicans, have largely been on the side of new technology. But the new House could provide a different level of oversight.

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