

Although the word is overused, last week really did see a seismic shift in the political world. Actually, there were two earthquakes — the victories of Democrats Warnock and Ossoff in Georgia, and the violent invasion of the U.S. capitol incited by Trump. While the significance of these events is much broader, their relevance to environmental and energy issues should not be overlooked. Basically, Biden's hand in Congress has just gotten stronger, and a green stimulus now seems more likely.

The two Senate wins in Georgia ensure that Mitch McConnell will be unable to control what reaches the Senate floor. That will clear the way to speedy confirmations for Biden's nominees for staffing his administration and for judicial nominees. It also means that Democrats can get votes for measures with broad bipartisan appeal that McConnell has blocked. And finally, it means that Democrats can use the budget reconciliation process for green tax and spending measures, and the Congressional Review Act to overturn Trump's destructive regulations. Those procedures require bare majority support rather than the usual sixty votes to avoid a filibuster.

One effect of the appalling assault on the Capitol has been a schism within the Republican Party and its business supporters. Today's GOP has increasingly been dominated by Trump and his populist nationalist followers. Businesses have come along for the ride in exchange for tax cuts and deregulation. This coalition seems to have been shattered. The head of the America Petroleum Institute said he found the assault on the Capitol "absolutely sickening" and "heartbreaking" and that he blamed Trump. The president of the National Association of Manufacturers said Mike Pence should "seriously consider working with the Cabinet to invoke the 25th Amendment to preserve democracy." Key Republicans such as Mitch McConnell broke from Trump in the tally of the Electoral College vote. The aftermath is likely to be very bitter. This schism will make it harder for opponents to environmental measures to coordinate their resistance. It will also probably make it easier for moderates like Susan Collins to support some climate measures.

Despite these shifts, getting significant congressional action on climate or anything else will be far from easy. The filibuster remains a huge hurdle in the Senate, with the exceptions discussed above. Moreover, the Democratic margin is razor thin in the Senate and only a bit thicker in the House. Holding everyone together will require enormous skill. Yet, the prospects for congressional action have definitely improved.