

Global Agricultural Development Initiative

Issue Brief Series

The 112th Congress: Implications for Global Agriculture and Feed the Future

by Connie Veillette

February 7, 2011 - With the convening of the 112th Congress, many observers are contemplating the implications for particular issues and agendas. How the new Congress handles issues relating to global food security will depend on a number of factors, some not directly related to the Congress itself.

The global food price crisis that occurred in 2007 and lasted well into 2009 provoked a response from the Bush White House at the end of his administration and the Obama White House early in his. The Bush Administration called for an increase in foreign assistance devoted to agriculture and food aid. President Obama's Feed the Future initiative is a comprehensive approach to promoting global food security. Neither Administration actively engaged with the Congress outside of seeking higher appropriated levels for food security related programs.

In the 112th Congress, the legislative agenda and relations between Congress and the White House will depend to a great extent on the styles of leadership of the House and Senate, the current political and economic environment, and the most certain effects of the looming elections of 2012.

The Agenda

The 112th Congress shares many similarities with others that have come about as a result of mid-term

elections. Elected in the midst of a President's first term, these Congresses tend to see their purpose as a mandate to take the country in a different direction. Ironically, the dynamic of divided government, between the executive branch and one chamber of Congress in this case, often forces collaboration on must-pass bills while other issues are captured by the approach of the next elections. The current Congress also will be influenced by ideological differences and heightened partisanship that has become a hallmark in recent times.

Members of the 112th Congress did not run on foreign policy issues and a foreign policy agenda of the House Republican majority is not entirely clear. However, some priorities, such as fiscal austerity, will have consequences for global food security. House Republicans have promised to roll back the federal budget to FY2008 levels and some in its more conservative wing have identified specific cuts across all government agencies.

The first order of business will be to finish the FY2011 budget that was held over from the previous Congress. Although the President's Feed the Future initiative has not been identified specifically as a possible spending cut, there are proposals to scale back or eliminate the development assistance account from which most of the initiative is funded. Deliberations on the FY2012 budget will begin in earnest in February when the President sends his

spending plan to Congress. In addition to budget battles, the 112th Congress will write a new Farm Bill as the current version expires in 2012. That bill contains numerous food aid programs.

The outcome of budget clashes and a new Farm Bill will certainly be affected by new leaders, the quirkiness of divided government, House-Senate relations, the willingness of both the White House and Congressional leaders to work together on some issues, and possibly, world events.

Change in House Majority and Divided Government

The November 2010 elections returned Republicans to the majority in the House and undermined the Democratic majority in the Senate. Conventional wisdom suggests that under unified government, the Congress often applies less scrutiny to White House proposals and is generally more supportive of Presidential initiatives. Divided government is more predisposed toward gridlock, particularly in highly politicized environments.

There is another aspect to executive-legislative relations that merits some attention. During times of unified government, the President often engages with Congress less because he assumes that his own party will support his legislative proposals. Knowing that Congress would not block administrative action to implement the Feed the Future initiative meant that the Administration pursued a go-it-alone strategy. The dynamic changes under a divided government. Expecting opposition, and even obstruction, administrations often find themselves engaging in a more collaborative fashion in order to build support and get Congressional buy-in for important initiatives. Recall that health care reform was passed without much attention to Republican proposals in the 111th Congress, but the President has stated his willingness to review important aspects of the new law in the Republican-dominated 112th.

The fact that the Obama Administration did not constructively engage with Congress, or seek authorizing legislation, on its Feed the Future initiative does not bode well. Unlike the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) for which legislative approval was sought and consequently has enjoyed enduring congressional support, there is no legislative underpinning for Feed the Future.

House Leadership and Committees

With a change in majority comes new congressional leadership, both in formal leadership positions and on committees. The new Speaker of the House, John Boehner, has promised a return to "regular order." Regular order implies that the rules for how Congress considers legislation will not be overridden and that the rights of the minority will be protected. More specifically, Speaker Boehner has promised that power over writing legislation will migrate back to committees and that legislation will be debated on the floor under open rules allowing, if not unlimited amendments, then at least more amendments than under closed rules.

That he will be able to follow through on these promises is yet to be seen. Open rules are time consuming and often subject Members to difficult votes. The best intentions can be overtaken by the imperative to get bills passed and to prevent the need for difficult votes as elections approach.

Committees, where issue expertise resides, could regain clout under regular order. The Republican majority has reduced the size of committees so that Members do not have to divide as much of their time among competing hearings and markups. The ratio between majority and minority has also changed to reflect that of each chamber. The three committees with some jurisdiction over food security – the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the House Appropriations Committee and the House Agriculture Committee – will be under pressure to produce legislation

acceptable to the chamber's majority, as will their Senate counterparts.

Committee Agendas

The foreign affairs authorizing committees have largely been unable to move major foreign policy legislation to the floor. The Foreign Assistance Authorization Act that is the legislative framework for foreign assistance programs has not been reauthorized since 1985. With a Congress more focused on domestic economic conditions than foreign ones, it is likely that leadership will not be amenable to bringing such bills to the floor. There is good reason why the Senate chose to finish approval of the START treaty in the waning days of the 111th Congress.

The committees themselves may also decide that certain efforts are not worth the trouble, and committee leadership may choose to offer very issue-specific legislation. The new House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) chair, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, has made her views clear. She is skeptical of foreign assistance programs and international institutions that she argues have not focused sufficiently on human rights and rogue regimes. She is joined by subcommittee chairs who largely share her views. Many members will not be well versed in global issues – eight Republicans and five Democrats named to the Committee are freshman.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) remains under the leadership of two internationalists – John Kerry of Massachusetts and Richard Lugar of Indiana. The slimmer Democrat majority in the Senate means that the committee will have a 10 to 9 partisan split. With the difficulty in scheduling floor time for foreign policy bills and the prerogative of Senators to hold bills and therefore require unanimous consent, it is highly probable that major SFRC legislation will not see floor time.

Even though the Global Food Security Act, written at the end of the Bush Administration, originated with the committee at the direction of Senator Lugar, it will be difficult to overcome hurdles that prevented its passage last Congress. HFAC is likely much less interested in a legislative endorsement of the President's anti-hunger initiative.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees face a different but equally vexing situation. Charged with shepherding through "must-pass" annual spending bills, the committees operate with every intention of moving bills to the floor, if not individually, then in a year-end bill. The State/Foreign Operations subcommittees write what many in Congress consider to be the least popular bill and it is often held until last or is carried on other appropriations bills. This year, the Committees are faced with finalizing FY2011 spending, held over by a continuing resolution that extends current funding levels into March, before being able to turn to the FY2012 budget that will be submitted to Congress in February. In the meantime, the House Committee has been tasked with finding significant savings by identifying cuts in unobligated funds from previous years, and cuts to the FY2011 budget with the goal of reducing government expenditures to 2008 levels.

Under a Democrat Congress, the Appropriations Committee has been supportive of increased funding for agriculture development assistance and has funded the Feed the Future initiative with only minor cuts. With the drive to find savings, it is doubtful this level of support will continue in the 112th unless the Administration engages in better congressional outreach, or a new food crisis grips the attention of policymakers.

In a globalized world, agriculture policies of individual countries can have major impact on other regions, through subsidies that make some exports more competitive or trade policies that can be discriminatory in nature. The Agriculture

Committees will play an important role in global food security in the 112th Congress as it takes up a new Farm Bill.

Writing a new farm bill is always a contentious process, involving the competing interests of commodity groups, free traders, the university and scientific communities, and advocates of more effective food assistance programs. Among the bill's provisions are food aid programs, such as PL 480 Food for Peace, the Emerson Humanitarian Trust, the McGovern-Dole Food Program, and the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS).ⁱ

The Farm Bill traditionally includes limitations on the local and regional procurement of food aid that many studies have concluded adds to the costs of U.S. programs while reducing the timeliness of responses to food crises. The problem with reforming some food aid programs is that U.S. domestic concerns drive decisions on these types of international programs. The Appropriations Committee is often faced by the same constraints when trying to repeal or reform the Bumpers Amendmentⁱⁱ or to do away with the monetization of food aid. The former is opposed by commodity groups while the latter by NGOs that fund some of their development programs by being allowed to sell food aid commodities. Both legislative provisions have been identified as costly and unproductive.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bicameral Dynamic

The old adage that the Senate is the saucer that cools the hot tea of the House is an apt description of bicameral relations in the 112th Congress. The adage can be true even when both chambers are controlled by the same party. When led by different parties, the phenomenon can be more pronounced. The House will live up to its reputation and design to reflect popular sentiment. The Senate will live up to its image as the deliberative body. However, knowing that the Senate will halt progress or significantly

moderate legislation allows the House to send bills reflecting a stridency that makes for good sound bites but not necessarily good law.

Recent agreements on reforming Senate rules will only marginally help in moving legislation by doing away with secret holds (but not the holds themselves), allowing more minority floor amendments, and easing up on certain kinds of filibusters. Passing most kinds of foreign policy legislation will still rely on obtaining the unanimous consent of all 100 Senators, which means bills are blandly written to avoid objections rather than to obtain a majority of votes.

Unknown Factors

The best-laid plans can become unhinged by world events. The Food and Agriculture Organization reports that its food price index rose 32 percent from June to December of 2010. This prompted a *New York Times* report to observe that "World food prices continued to rise sharply in December, bringing them close to the crisis level that provoked shortages and riots in poor countries three years ago."^{iv}

Although there is equally compelling evidence that future food price inflation will not reach previous levels, much still depends on harvest yields in major exporting countries. With corn and soybean crops affected by dry conditions in South America, flooding in Australia, and a harsh winter in the United States, it is entirely possible that pressures on supply will elevate prices. While the predicted price increases in the United States may be slight, a more precipitous increase elsewhere could cause some countries to limit exports and contribute to even higher global prices. If that is accompanied by riots and political instability, it will reinforce the message that global food security is in the national security interests of the United States.

Another factor that is still a bit murky is the extent to which the White House will expend some political capital in advocating global food security and in advancing Feed the Future. Without White House engagement, congressional advocates of supporting such efforts will be hard pressed to carry the day. Reviewing the history of executive-legislative relations in foreign policy tells us that while Congress can quite easily stop a Presidential initiative, it is rare that it can lead one of its own.

What Does This Mean for Global Food Security and Feed the Future?

As the 2012 elections approach, all legislation will be considered in the highly charged landscape of a presidential election campaign. Only foreign policy issues having the greatest security imperative will get floor time.

Foreign assistance spending will certainly see significant cuts as all government programs come under increased scrutiny. The Feed the Future initiative will not be immune. There have been some calls to eliminate the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the agency that has been given the lead to implement Feed the Future. While it is highly probable that the Senate will not concur, USAID will have to expend much time and energy defending itself and its programs. Writing a new Farm Bill will be a contentious process. Some House conservatives are calling for an entirely new

approach that does away with crop subsidies, but efforts to do so may ultimately be seen as too politically perilous.

All of this presents challenges to keeping a focus on global food security, but it does not necessarily mean an end to Feed the Future. However, the Administration will need to do a better job justifying its programs and working with Congress if its vision is to become reality.

ⁱ The FAS mission is to report on conditions abroad that affect U.S. exports and to assist U.S. farmers enter new markets. In recent years, it has also found itself in the business of the conflicting mission of foreign agricultural development.

ⁱⁱ The Bumpers Amendment restricts assistance for agricultural development if that assistance could improve the recipient county's ability to compete against U.S. farmers.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Renewing American Leadership in the Fight Against Global Hunger and Poverty*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2009; *International Food Assistance: Local and Regional Procurement Can Enhance the Efficiency of U.S. Food Aid, but Challenges May Constrain Its Implementation*, Government Accountability Office, May 2009; and *Monetization of Food Aid: Reconsidering U.S. Policy and Practice*, by Emmy Simmons, Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa, June 2009.

^{iv} New York Times, "U.N. Data Notes Sharp Rise in World Food Prices," William Newman, January 5, 2011. See also Food and Agriculture Organization Food Price Index at <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/FoodPricesIndex/en>.

About the Author

Connie Veillette is currently the Director of the Rethinking U.S. Foreign Assistance Program at the Center for Global Development. Prior to coming to CGD, she served as a Senior Professional Staff Member for Senator Lugar (R-Ind) on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee until August 2010. Her portfolio included oversight of foreign assistance and USAID, and aid reform issues. Previously, she was a Specialist in Foreign Assistance at the Congressional Research Service, where she researched foreign aid issues and advised Congress on policy options. She began her public service working for a Member of the House Appropriations Committee in a variety of capacities, the last 10 years as Chief of Staff. She is an adjunct professor at George Washington University where she has taught courses on International Relations, Legislative Politics, and Congress and Foreign Policy.

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