

NASA finally has a permanent administrator – 15 months into Trump's presidency

NASA has a full-time administrator at last. Today, the Senate confirmed President Donald Trump's nominee, Rep. Jim Bridenstine (R-OK), for the job, voting 50 to 49 along party lines. The vote finally brings to an end the longest period the space agency has gone without a permanent leader.

It was a close call for Bridenstine on the Senate floor today. With Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) absent, the vote came down to Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), who has been away from the Senate after recently having a baby, and Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ), who held out for a while. If Flake had voted no, it would have created a tie vote, 49 yeses to 49 nos. If that happened, Duckworth could have sunk the confirmation. However, Flake ultimately voted for Bridenstine, confirming the nomination. (Duckworth ultimately *did* come to the floor with her newborn to vote "no.")

"It is an honor to be confirmed by the United States Senate to serve as NASA Administrator," Bridenstine said in a statement after the vote. "I am humbled by this opportunity, and I once again thank President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence for their confidence. I look forward to working with the outstanding team at NASA to achieve the president's vision for American leadership in space."

It's been a slog to get to this point, thanks to a slow-moving administration and a divided Congress. President Trump didn't nominate Bridenstine until September of last year, and the congressman immediately became a divisive pick. Some lawmakers balked at the idea of a politician running a science agency, while many have criticized his comments on climate change and

LGBT rights. Despite a Republican-controlled Congress, for months it did not seem as if Bridenstine would have the votes needed to be confirmed.

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Meanwhile, NASA's leadership has been in a state of limbo. The agency has been relying on an acting administrator, Robert Lightfoot, since President Barack Obama left office in January 2017. Lightfoot has dutifully attended hearings and helped with budget requests, despite not being appointed by the administration. But in March, he announced his plans to retire on April 30th. That set Congress on a scramble to confirm Trump's pick before that date; otherwise, NASA would have been forced to rely on a *second* temporary leader – something that has never happened before.

As the administrator, Bridenstine is now tasked with helping execute the administration's vision for NASA. Trump has told the space agency to return humans to the Moon, as well as transition the International Space Station and the domain of low Earth orbit to the private space industry over the next decade. Bridenstine will need to work with both the White House and Congress to figure out how to turn these bold plans into reality.

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A former Navy pilot, Bridenstine has been active in space policy during his time representing Oklahoma. Because his state is often hit by tornadoes, he's championed a pilot program to make it easier for the US government to collect weather data from commercial satellites. Bridenstine also authored his own space policy bill, called the American Space Renaissance Act, aimed at outlining new regulations for the space industry.

Yet, Bridenstine is not an engineer nor a scientist. And while NASA has had administrators without science backgrounds

before, Bridenstine will be the first politician to have the job – and that doesn't sit well with many lawmakers. "NASA is one of the last refuges from partisan politics," Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) said during Bridenstine's confirmation hearing in November. "NASA needs a leader who will unite us, not divide us. Respectfully, Congressman Bridenstine, I don't think you're that leader."

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Many in the science community have also criticized Bridenstine's views on climate change. In 2013, the congressman inaccurately stated during a speech that global temperatures stopped rising over a decade ago. However, during his confirmation hearing, Bridenstine said that he *does* believe humans have contributed to global warming (though he wouldn't say to what extent). He also has indicated that, as NASA administrator, he plans to defer to scientists on how to best study the climate.

Others have criticized Bridenstine's stances against LGBT rights; in 2013, he condemned the Supreme Court's decision to make same-sex marriage constitutional. And just yesterday, the *Daily Beast* reported that Bridenstine had mismanaged funds of a nonprofit he once ran, using the organization's money to help out a separate company he owned.

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The controversy surrounding Bridenstine has made his confirmation slow and difficult. His nomination narrowly advanced through a Senate subcommittee in November, thanks to a vote along party lines. Then his nomination had to be *resubmitted* in early 2018 because he had not been confirmed before the Senate's first session had ended. Meanwhile, NASA has set a new record: before Trump, the agency had only been without a Senate-confirmed leader for no longer than six months. Now that record gap has stretched to 15 months.

Perhaps, the most notable person standing in the way of Bridenstine's confirmation has been Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL). When Bridenstine was first announced as Trump's nominee, Rubio criticized the idea of a politician running NASA along with the other Florida senator, Bill Nelson. However, Rubio changed his mind after acting administrator Lightfoot announced his retirement plans, threatening NASA with a leadership void. The space agency's mission "is vital to Florida," Rubio said in a statement yesterday. "I expect him to lead NASA in a non-political way and to treat Florida fairly."

Yesterday, the Senate just narrowly voted (again) to end the debate and advance Bridenstine's nomination to a full confirmation hearing. At first, the votes were tied, 49 to 49, with all Democrats opting not to advance the nomination, as well as Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ). But Flake eventually changed his vote, making the final count 50 to 48.

Now that Bridenstine has the job, he has at least two and a half years to lead NASA and advocate for the administration's space policy. As the Trump administration has indicated, big changes may be on the horizon for NASA.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/19/17256146/nasa-administrator-jim-bridenstine-senate-confirmation>