# Washington Report Headlines

#### Congressional & Administation News

* What to Know in Washington: Health Care, Guns, Trade Lead Debate

**Agriculture News**

#### Farm-State Lawmakers Push Trade Deal as Pelosi Pumps the Brakes

#### Federal Employee News

#### Raise, OPM Breakup, Other Issues Greet Returning Congress

# Congressional & Administration News

**What to Know in Washington: Health Care, Guns, Trade Lead Debate**

September 13, 2019 6:59AM ET

The debate threw into sharp relief a dividing line among Democrats, as the contenders argued how far to go to insure more Americans, remove guns from the streets and promote fair trade.

Over three hours, former Vice President Joe Biden led the moderate camp, raising doubts about the cost of “Medicare for All” and defending his four-decade record of public service.

In her first time on stage with Biden, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) held back, training her fire on Wall Street and Washington lobbyists rather than her Democratic rivals and retelling her personal story.

But with Warren rising in the polls, Biden took the chance to press her on her health care proposal.

“Thus far, my distinguished friend, the senator on my left, has not indicated how she pays for it,” he said.

The rest of the field had brief moments that, for better or worse, defined their nights. Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) used her time to directly attack President Donald Trump; former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro went after Biden on health care and immigration; South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg popped in at times to call for civility and former Rep. Beto O’Rourke (D-Texas) repeated his call for a mandatory assault weapon buyback. Entrepreneur Andrew Yang announced that his campaign would give $1,000 a month for a year to 10 families to highlight his proposal for a universal basic income.

There were likely no game-changing moments during the debate, but it provided plenty of fodder for moderates and progressives as they outline two very different approaches to taking on Trump in the months to come.

**What the Candidates Talked About:** If the debates are any indicator, health care is shaping up as the hallmark issue of the 2020 Democratic primary. The 10 candidates who took part in the debate in Houston sparred about health care more than any other issue—21% of topics during the nearly three-hour event. It’s been the top issue discussed in the three Democratic debates so far. Guns were a focus for the candidates after recent mass shootings. Foreign policy—particularly Trump’s handling of an escalating trade war with China—and education were discussed more than in earlier debates.

**Biden Wins by Not Losing:** Rivals eager to dislodge Biden from his front-runner’s perch tried attacking him in last month’s debate and going easy on him in last night’s debate. Neither worked. The night in Houston highlighted a puzzle that has vexed 2020 hopefuls — how to knock Biden off his game. Frequent gaffes haven’t hurt him. His 76 years haven’t stopped him. His checkered history on race hasn’t sunk him.

**Trump Comments from Afar:** Trump did his best to join Democrats on the debate stage last night, assailing several of his would-be 2020 opponents during a speech to Republican lawmakers in Baltimore. He once again derided Warren as “Pocahontas” and Biden as “Sleepy Joe.” Trump attacked Democrats’ proposals on health care, the environment and energy. He said that with windmills generating electricity, viewers wouldn’t be able to watch Democrats debate if the wind wasn’t blowing.

**Happening on the Hill**

**Afghanistan Envoy Subpoenaed by Engel**: House Foreign Affairs Chairman Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) yesterday subpoenaed Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad to testify at an open hearing on Sept. 19. In an emailed statement, Engel said the State Department has ignored numerous requests for briefings by Khalilzad about the Afghanistan peace plan and the Trump administration’s envisioned path forward in that country.

**Boeing Interviews in 737 Probe Sought:** House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) and Aviation Subcommittee Chairman Rick Larsen (D-Wash.), whose panel is examining the two crashes of the Boeing 737 Max that led to its March worldwide grounding, are seeking interviews with employees. The committee wrote to Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg to request the interviews, it said in a statement yesterday.

**Around the Administration**

**Trump Plans to Unveil Middle Class Tax Cut:** Trump said yesterday that he’s planning a tax cut directed at the middle class that will be announced in the next year. “It will be a very substantial tax cut,” Trump told Republicans at the retreat in Baltimore. He said the tax cut would be “very, very inspirational” without providing details.

Trump spoke a day after deciding against cutting the tax on capital gains by indexing gains to inflation. That decision was announced late Wednesday after a meeting earlier between the president and his economic advisers, who discussed whether to move ahead with the tax break. The administration has also put off the idea of a possible cut in payroll taxes, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told CNBC earlier yesterday. Mnuchin said that Trump was focused instead on a second round of proposed tax cuts.

**Trump Paves Way For Arctic Drilling Rights Sale: The** Trump administration yesterday took a major step toward auctioning oil drilling rights across every acre of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’s coastal plain, hours after the House voted to outlaw the activity. In an environmental impact statement, the Interior Department acknowledged oil development in the refuge’s 1.56 million-acre coastal plain could affect polar bear and caribou that roam through the region.

Nevertheless, the document released yesterday sets the stage for an auction later this year; it is a required legal step before the Interior Department can take bids. The Trump administration’s proposal to open the entire coastal plain for leasing goes far beyond a congressional mandate to make at least 400,000 acres available and hold two auctions of oil and gas leases by 2021 and 2024. Congress lifted decades-old restrictions on oil development in the refuge and required the sales in 2017, as a way to pay for the tax overhaul.

**Trump Open to Interim China Deal:** Trump administration officials have discussed offering a limited trade agreement to China that would delay and even roll back some U.S. tariffs for the first time in exchange for Chinese commitments on intellectual property and agricultural purchases, according to five people familiar with the matter. Some of Trump’s top trade advisers in recent days have discussed the plan in preparation for two rounds of face-to-face negotiations with Chinese officials in Washington, due to take place in coming weeks, the people said.

Meanwhile, China is encouraging companies to buy U.S. farm products including soybeans and pork, and it will exclude those goods from additional tariffs. The Commerce Ministry’s announcement today follows a move earlier this week to exempt a range of American goods from 25% extra tariffs put in place last year, as the government seeks to ease the impact from the trade war. China didn’t specify the amount of purchases of pork and soybeans, which are key exports in agricultural states important for Trump ahead of next year’s election.

**Trump Seeks to Block District Court Injunctions:** The Trump administration is looking for a vehicle to challenge in the Supreme Court what it calls overreach by federal district courts in issuing national injunctions against environmental rules. In past years, district courts issued injunctions against rules only as they applied in a particular geographic area or situation in the challenge to the rule. But more recently, federal judges have been issuing nationwide injunctions on a rule when a challenge is brought to their court, said Eric Grant, deputy assistant attorney general of the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the U.S. Justice Department.

**In the Courts**

**Trump Taps Two Florida Supreme Court Justices:** Trump announced he intends to nominate two Florida Supreme Court justices to the federal appeals court for Florida, Alabama and Georgia. The president tapped Barbara Lagoa for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. She was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court earlier this year. Before that she served as an appeals court judge in Florida state court. Lagoa was also formerly an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of Florida. Robert Luck was also named for the Eleventh Circuit. Like Lagoa, he was tapped for the Florida Supreme Court this year after serving on a Florida appeals court. Luck was an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of Florida before that.

**Gorsuch Joins Justices ‘Lifting the Veil’ With Memoirs:** Neil Gorsuch just penned his first book as a Supreme Court justice, joining a growing list of high court colleagues who’ve penned memoirs to tell their stories and influence their legacies. Gorsuch’s “A Republic, If You Can Keep It” is styled as a call for more civility and civic understanding. But it has elements of memoir, including his Colorado roots, his Supreme Court clerkship, and his decade on what he calls “the most collegial federal circuit in the country.”

“Years ago, such books would be seen as very unusual for a sitting justice to write—lifting the veil, if you will, on the ‘invisible’ court,” said Elliot E. Slotnick, who studies judicial politics at Ohio State University. “Going public,” though, is “less of a norm violation these days,” Slotnick said.

# Agriculture News

## Farm-State Lawmakers Push Trade Deal as Pelosi Pumps the Brakes

* Democrats are reviewing offer on North American trade pact
* Farm-state lawmakers from both parties urge speedy approval

By Teaganne Finn | September 12, 2019 2:04PM ET

House members representing rural districts are ramping up their drive to win approval of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, but a wary House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](https://www.bgov.com/core/legislators/#!/BB163) said the free-trade deal needs more fixes before getting full support from House Democrats.

“I immediately came out in favor of USMCA. I think it’s a good agreement and it’s something we need to get done,” said House Agriculture Committee Chairman [Collin Peterson](https://www.bgov.com/core/legislators/#!/BB354) (D-Minn.), during a rally hosted by Farmers for Free Trade, a non-profit that promotes agricultural free trade agreements.

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer on Wednesday sent House Democrats a new offer on the stalled agreement in an effort to resolve concerns about the trade deal and finally bring it to a vote. Democrats have brought demands on labor, environment, drug price, and enforcement provisions.

“In order to be made better it has to be improved greatly in terms of enforcement,” Pelosi said Thursday. At this time, “there’s nothing to put on the floor,” she said.

### Finish Line

Some Democrats representing districts with constituents reliant on agriculture trade are coming out in favor of the agreement.

“All we have to do is put it to a vote. I feel very confident,” Rep. [Henry Cuellar](https://www.bgov.com/core/legislators/#!/BB7666) (D-Texas) said during the rally. His district is home to many citrus growers.

Following a conversation earlier this week with House Ways and Means Chairman [Richard Neal](https://www.bgov.com/core/legislators/#!/BB314) (D-Mass.),

Peterson said the agreement is “on track” to getting a House vote in the next couple of months.

Peterson echoed Cuellar, saying: “Right now I’m optimistic about the chances of getting this done.”

# Federal Employee News

**Raise, OPM Breakup, Other Issues Greet Returning Congress**

Published: September 11, 2019

More in: Fedweek

An agreement before the recess has lessened chances of a partial government shutdown but some type of further measure must be enacted before September 30 to prevent one.

Congress is back at work this week, returning to face issues of importance to federal employees that it left on the table when it recessed more than a month ago, including a federal raise in January, the potential breakup of OPM and other agencies, and more.

With less than three weeks of working time before the current fiscal year ends September 30, some action will be needed on funding agencies beyond the expiration of current spending authority. A general budgetary agreement enacted just before the recess, allotting more money than would have been available under a previous agreement, seems to have greatly lessened chances of a partial government shutdown.

However, some type of further measure must be enacted before September 30 to prevent one. The House has passed only 10 of the 12 regular appropriations bills for fiscal year 2020 while the Senate has passed none, leading to an expectation that a temporary extension will be needed. The Senate Appropriations Committee is starting to write its versions this week.

Among the measures the House has passed—but is not yet on the Senate committee schedule—is the general government appropriations bill (HR-3351), which would provide a total average 3.1 percent raise with the first full pay period of January, split as 2.6 percent across the board and 0.5 percentage points for variable locality pay. During the recess, President Trump abandoned his prior call for a pay freeze and backed a 2.6 percent raise with no locality component. That narrowed, but did not close, the difference.

A wider difference of opinion remains over the planned further steps to break up OPM. Its background investigations function already is in transition to DoD and that will be finalized effective October 1. The House bill would deny funding for the remaining planned steps of sending the retirement, insurance and HR services functions of OPM to the GSA while creating a new office under OMB to oversee personnel policies. The bill also contains language to essentially bar agencies from unilaterally imposing new policies over subjects that previously had been negotiated.

Several weeks ago, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland asserted that the House will not allow the further OPM reorganization steps to happen; more recently a majority of the House signed a joint letter urging the Democratic leadership to hold firm on the bargaining provision. Also, the AFGE union has filed a suit contending that decisions being issued in favor of management in disputes over the allowable scope of bargaining are invalid; it argues that by law, the Federal Services Impasses Panel, an arm of the FLRA, cannot issue such decisions without a full complement of members and that the members must be confirmed by the Senate and not directly appointed by the White House, as the current members were.

Disputes over agency reorganizations also could figure in other spending bills, with language in the House bills designed to block planned transfers of employees at Agriculture and Interior.