

Brownback narrowly confirmed as international religious freedom ambassador

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WASHINGTON—By the narrowest margin, the U.S. Senate voted Jan. 24 to confirm Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

The deadlocked Senate voted 49-49, with Vice President Mike Pence casting the tie-breaking vote to allow Brownback to fill the post left vacant since David Sapperstein stepped down a year ago.

Brownback will head the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, which monitors religious freedom abuses globally.

Immediately after the Senate vote, Brownback took to Twitter to tweet: "I'm looking forward to starting my new position as ambassador and working hard for the American people and religious freedom around the world."

Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., who had made filling the ambassadorship a legislative priority, [voiced his support](#) for Brownback and his belief in the importance of the Office of International Religious Freedom.

"Confirmation of Sam Brownback as the ambassador-at-large sends a message to the world that religious freedom is a priority of the United States government," he said. "It is an important first step, but we cannot stop there. Religious freedom must be an integral part of our overall national security and we must use all tools available to condemn acts of religious persecution."

Contrasting responses



Amanda Tyler

The [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#)—which does not take positions on appointments to office—offered a measured response to Brownback’s confirmation.

“Some of Gov. Brownback’s prior positions on issues of religious freedom for everyone are concerning, such as his praise for President Trump’s original travel ban that differentiated among refugees fleeing religious-based persecution,” said Amanda Tyler, BJC executive director.

“The prolonged nomination process and razor-thin margin on final passage reflect additional concerns that Gov. Brownback’s domestic policy positions may negatively impact his ability to serve in this diplomatic post.

“We are encouraged by Gov. Brownback’s testimony that he would continue the work of Ambassador David Saperstein, and we look forward to working with Ambassador Brownback in his new role.”



Russell Moore

In contrast, Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's [Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#), called Brownback "an outstanding choice" for the ambassador's role and said he was "delighted to see the Senate confirm him to serve in this critical post."

"This ambassadorship is a key piece in our nation's responsibility to act on behalf of the persecuted around the world, one that requires a seasoned, respected leader who brings conviction and gravity to the work of this crucial post. Governor Brownback is exactly this kind of leader," he said.

Moore pointed to Brownback's human rights record in the Senate, predicting he "will be an exceptional ambassador."

"He has my prayers and pledge of full cooperation, and I look forward to working with him in the years ahead. We need all the diplomatic and intellectual power we can muster in addressing these critical matters of human rights and global security."



Frank Wolf

In spite of the narrow vote along party lines, former U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf insisted international religious freedom remains “one of the few nonpartisan issues in Washington, both fundamental to our identity as Americans and also essential to our national security.”

“In Sam Brownback, we have a leader who not only understands the intricacies of Capitol Hill; he has a heart and the demonstrated passion for the mission of this office,” said Wolf, distinguished senior fellow with the [21st Century Wilberforce Initiative](#).

Experience in the House and Senate

Before Brownback was elected governor, he served in the U.S. Senate from 1996 to 2011, after having served in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1995-96.

In the Senate, he was co-sponsor of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He also was co-chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus.

During the Darfur crisis in 2004, Brownback led efforts for a genocide declaration, and he also introduced human rights legislation related to North Korea and Sudan.

He chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Sub-Committee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, and he co-chaired the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

Support from conservative Christian

groups

Brownback's [nomination received support](#) from several Christian religious freedom advocacy groups.

Nate Lance, advocacy manager for International Christian Concern, welcomed the news of Brownback's confirmation as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

"This ambassadorship plays a critical role in prioritizing religious freedom issues in U.S. foreign policy and advocating for religious minorities around the world who are persecuted for their faith or lack thereof," Lance said. "Having someone who is a governor and former U.S. senator elevates this position, making the ambassadorship a stronger advocate for freedom of religion or belief."

Thomas Farr, president of the Religious Freedom Institute, voiced appreciation to the Senate for Brownback's confirmation.

"Ambassador Brownback's deep experience, and his commitment to religious freedom for all people, will help ensure American leadership in the vital work of reducing global religious persecution," Farr said. "We believe he will make U.S. religious freedom policy an integral part of America's national security strategy."

Michael Farris, president/chief executive officer and general counsel for the Alliance Defending Freedom, praised Brownback for his "clear passion and understanding" of religious freedom issues.

"America must defend and protect religious freedom globally, and Gov. Brownback is unquestionably capable of engaging this vital mission," Farris said. "It's clear from history that when any nation abuses or suppresses religious freedom, other freedoms are likewise in danger. America needs a

strong advocate for the basic human rights and dignity of those who wish to live consistently with their faith without undue government interference.”

Strong opposition noted

On the other hand, the [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#) criticized Brownback for his support of a 2012 anti-Sharia law bill that prohibits state courts and agencies from using Islamic law in rendering decisions.

Gay rights groups, including the [Human Rights Campaign](#), opposed Brownback for signing an executive order that reversed a previous order barring discrimination against LGBT state workers.

[Planned Parenthood](#) also criticized his record both on LGBT rights and abortion rights.

President Trump initially nominated Brownback for the ambassador’s position last July. When the Senate failed to vote on his nomination before Dec. 31, Trump had to renominate him.