

# The least productive Congress ever

As the list of unfinished business grows, lawmakers are on track to set a new record for futility

With Memorial Day approaching, Congress is preparing to take a break from the unyielding demands of doing nothing. The Senate will be out next week. The House will take its breather the following week.

Having enacted 104 laws since early 2013, the 113th Congress is on track to break the previous record low of 283, set in 2011-12 by the 112th Congress. And with last fall's pointless government shutdown, the current Congress reached a level of dysfunction that the 112th never attained.

To call the 113th Congress bad is like calling water wet. It is harming the economy in the short term while running from serious long-term problems. Appropriately, its approval ratings are stuck in the teens, with occasion dips into single digits.

Wags like to quip that the nation is better off when Congress is away from Washington on one of its many recesses and "district work periods." There might be a kernel of truth in that, but there's nothing amusing about gridlock when two-thirds of all federal spending is on autopilot and serious issues are left to fester.

In lieu of legislating, this Congress specializes in posturing.

In the Republican-controlled House, endless votes to repeal Obamacare have given way to endless hearings on Benghazi, designed to do political harm to President Obama and the possible candidacy of Hillary Clinton.

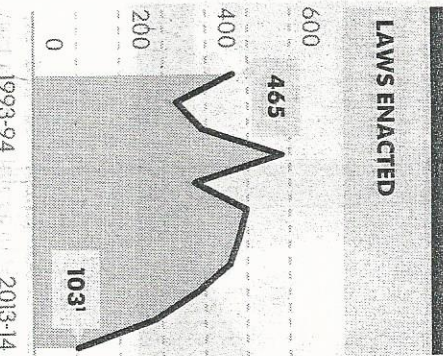


LAREN VICTORIA BURKE/AP  
Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., on Capitol Hill on Thursday.

In the Democrat-controlled Senate, playing to the party base before the midterm elections is the order of the day. If senators aren't debating an excessive hike in the minimum wage, they are pushing unrealistic subsidies for student loans that have no chance of reaching Obama's desk.

Meanwhile, a partial list of unfinished business looks like this:

► **Deficit reduction.** After the last Congress twice failed to reach a "grand bargain" on the nation's bleak fiscal outlook, this one isn't even trying. With the health care and retirement spending rising fast, and set to explode as Baby Boomers retire, a serious financial crisis looms. But don't tell that to members hiding behind their lines in the sand, focused solely on the next election.



1- through May 20.  
Source: The Library of Congress

► **A road fix.** The highway trust fund is set to go broke this summer. The simplest, fairest way to deal with declining gasoline tax revenue is to raise the 18.4 cent federal tax, which hasn't been hiked in 21 years. Instead, lawmakers are bound by anti-tax pledges to purify enforcement groups. And they're balking at shifting money to highways because that would be a "payout."

► **Tax simplification.** While members of Congress understand that the nation's convoluted tax code is a huge burden on individuals and businesses, they won't act. That would involve taking on powerful lobbies and resolving a partisan fight over whether tax reform should involve raising revenue. Don't count on either happening any time soon.



JOHN DAVENPORT VIA AP  
House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, in San Antonio on May 12.

► **Climate legislation.** Even as evidence mounts that humans are warming the globe, the chances for any action by this Congress are approximately zero. This is the result of a vocal contingent of climate change skeptics, and another large group of lawmakers who don't want to stick out their necks or take on fossil fuel interests.

► **The mail.** The Postal Service has been bleeding red ink for some time, thanks to declining volume and costly benefits. To remain solvent it needs major changes, such as closing post offices and eliminating Saturday delivery. Though it is possible something could get enacted by fall, Congress' response so far has been to undermine management's efforts to make cuts.

► **Housing.** After the 2008 financial meltdown, there was bipartisan agreement that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, government-backed companies that subsidize lending by putting taxpayers at risk, should be downsized or eliminated. But Obama's plan and at least two major bills in the Senate have gone nowhere.

► **Immigration overhaul.** With broad support coming from business groups and the general public, one would think that a fix to the nation's broken immigration system would be a done deal. Democrats have long wanted it. And Republicans need it if they are going to remain viable in national elections. Though a balanced plan has passed the Senate, it is being blocked by conservatives in the House.

About the only recent sign of progress on Capitol Hill is bipartisan legislation to curb the National Security Agency's bulk collection of Americans' phone records. But even the measure that cleared the House on Thursday was watered down and faces an uncertain future in the Senate.

Taken as a whole, the 113th Congress is a vivid example of how a nation with an innovative private sector and adaptive populace is being held back by a legislative branch that can't even resolve relatively small things such as road funding, let alone the big challenges such as climate change and the national debt.