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Some of Republicans' 2010 'Pledge' promises proving elusive

Tea party activists rap backtracking in House

By Seth McLaughlin

As they head into their third election since their 2010 Pledge to America, House Republicans have checked off some of the easier items they promised voters, but most of the heavy lifting remains a work in progress — and on some, including imposing spending cuts, they've recently begun to backtrack.

The pledge, released just before Republicans seized control of the House in the 2010 election, mapped out their plans to pursue a legislative agenda that returned the GOP to the small-government principles that spawned the tea party rebellion against both President George W. Bush and President Obama.

Four years later, House Speaker John A. Boehner and the GOP, aided by Democrats, have thwarted Mr. Obama's plan to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where terrorism suspects are being held. And soon after they assumed power in 2011, Republicans pushed through a repeal of a burdensome Obamacare paperwork requirement for small businesses, again earning the support of Democrats and even Mr. Obama.

But grass-roots conservative activists say House leaders have backed away from key parts of the Pledge, including failing to repeal and replace Obamacare.

They're also highly critical of recent budget, spending and farm bills for breaking the Pledge's vow to limit legislation to single issues. The GOP had warned that big bills allow bad provisions to slip through — something many lawmakers argued happened with all three recent accomplishments.

David Bozell, executive director of ForAmerica, which is among the conservative and tea party groups calling for Mr. Boehner to get booted from his post in 2015, said the December budget deal also violated the pledge to publish the text online for "at least three days before coming up for a vote in the House of Representatives."

The House GOP also failed to cancel the Trouble Asset Relief Program and to reform Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Others, though, are more willing to cut House Republicans some slack because of the divided Congress.

"A lot of the problem has been the look across the aisle to a highly polarized environment in the House, [Senate Majority Leader] Harry Reid staring at you in the Senate and Barack Obama waving his famous veto pen from the White House," said Charlie Gerow, a member of the American Conservative Union. "At some point, you have to make strategic decisions about what politics is all about, which is the art of the possible."

On process, the GOP instituted a new requirement that House members introducing bills cite the specific parts of the Constitution that they think granted Congress the authority to take the action they are proposing.

But when it comes to needing Senate cooperation, many of the GOP's promises have foundered: Republicans were unable to extend all of the Bush-era tax cuts, and have struggled to broaden the ban on taxpayer-funded abortions.

And then there are areas where the House GOP has backtracked.

After winning a debt deal in 2011 that imposed strict caps on discretionary spending for the rest of this decade, including the budget sequesters, Republicans walked those caps back somewhat in December, approving a new budget deal that raises the amount of spending in 2014 and 2015 — while promising to shift cuts later.

That put a dent in the House GOP's plans to "roll back government spending to pre-stimulus, pre-bailout levels."

"They could argue that they have not passed legislation because they don't have the Senate or the White House, but I would argue that they have stopped fighting for these things," said Chris Edwards, of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "The budget deal was one of the more profoundly depressing things I have seen from them in recent years, because that was the big win they had since the tea party win of 2010 — and they gutted it."

The House GOP's own online scorecard for the Pledge hasn't been updated since just before the 2012 election, which saw the GOP lose ground.

Still, Republicans say the Pledge is still active.

"Though Democrats still run Washington, and we still have a lot of work to do, we have kept our promises to the American people," said Michael Steel, Mr. Boehner's spokesman. "As a result of our majority in the House, government spending has been cut, tax hikes have been blocked, and Congress itself is more open, transparent and accountable."