

GOP readies major push for Internet transparency

by [Declan McCullagh](#)

Republicans are planning to use the Internet as a sledgehammer to clobber the secretive way in which Congress has traditionally done business.

Through a set of almost-radical changes that most Americans would probably view as common sense, the incoming GOP majority is set to approve rules saying that legislation must be posted online three days before a vote and that committee amendments will also be publicly posted.

Politicians' formal votes in committees will also be disclosed, and audio and video recordings will be permanently posted "in a manner that is easily accessible to the public," according to the rules that are scheduled for a vote tomorrow. Witness testimony and amendments must be posted within 24 hours of a hearing.

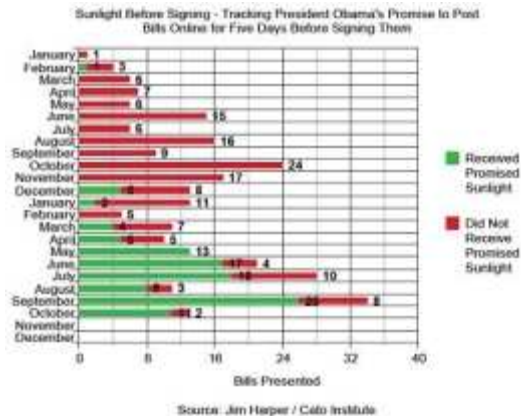
In two more nods to technology and openness, electronic devices will now be allowed on the House floor (as long as they don't impair "decorum"), and the opening session of the new Congress will be [live-streamed](#) on Facebook at noon ET tomorrow.

These rules, championed by incoming House majority leader Eric Cantor and [hinted at](#) through a Twitter post last month by soon-to-be House Speaker John Boehner, are part of the Republicans' efforts to reshape the legislative process. Other portions say all legislation must include statements specifying "the power or powers granted to Congress in the Constitution to enact the bill," and measures normally may not be considered if they "have the net effect of increasing mandatory spending."

"Taken together, these reforms will allow more time for quality consideration while increasing the House's efficiency and guaranteeing the public's right to know," Cantor said in a letter ([PDF](#)) to his colleagues.

What Cantor didn't say--and perhaps didn't need to say--is that these pro-transparency reforms are strikingly similar to what President Obama promised as a candidate in 2008. At the time, Obama [pledged](#) that he would "not sign any non-emergency bill without giving the American public an opportunity to review and comment on the White House Web site for five days."

Obama broke that promise. Only 45 percent of non-emergency bills have been posted on WhiteHouse.gov, according to Jim Harper, director of information studies at the nonpartisan, free-market [Cato Institute](#) in Washington, D.C., who has tracked the topic. (See CNET's [previous coverage](#).)



Despite his campaign promise, President Obama has not posted most bills on the White House Web site before signing them. The Republicans pledge to do better. (Bills posted before signing are in green, and ones not posted are in red.)

And while it's possible for the public to [submit comments](#) in those cases when the legislation is actually posted, they're accepted through a Web form and not displayed on the White House Web site.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi came under criticism, too, for saying in November 2009 she would "absolutely" post the final Obama health care bill online for three days before the vote.

That [didn't happen](#), leading to later [discoveries](#) about how the law affected gold coin purchases and [an admission](#) by one of the measure's champions that it was a "waste" of his time to [read the bill](#). (This has been a bipartisan tradition: the Patriot Act was also [rushed through](#) Congress without time for all members to read it.)

The Sunlight Foundation, which unsuccessfully prodded the Democratic congressional leadership toward legislative transparency, [said](#) it "applauds" the Republicans' new rules.

That applause came with some caveats. It might be possible for bills to be voted on after being available for portions of three calendar days instead of 72 hours, the group said, adding that "our enthusiasm for the rules change is only mildly tempered by these shortcomings."

"Speaker Pelosi's House made some perfunctory nods toward transparency but didn't make institutional improvements like Newt Gingrich did and the new Congress promises," says Harper, who has documented the White House's bill posting in a [series of Cato blog posts](#).

Then again, promises can be broken. Politico.com [reported](#) this evening that Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert persuaded his fellow Republicans to eliminate a transparency rule that would have required them to post records of attendance at committee hearings.

Just a few weeks earlier, Cantor had promised--the italics appeared in his letter--that "we will hold *ourselves* accountable in conducting meaningful and deliberative work by posting committee attendance" records online.

Read more: http://news.cnet.com/8301-31921_3-20027294-281.html#ixzz1AAxfCFSy