



Unproductive Congress: How stalemates became the norm in Washington DC

By Mark Murray – June 30th, 2013

A Congress already setting records for futility, a nation trying to absorb rapid transformation and a political system designed to slow the pace of change have led Washington D.C. into a gridlock.

The much-criticized 112th Congress - from 2011 to 2012 - was the least productive and least popular Congress on record, according to the available statistics.

Following the Supreme Court's ruling on the Voting Rights Act, NBC's Chuck Todd says he's a pessimist on Congress' ability to update the map that determines which states must get federal permission before they change their voting laws.

Now six months in – highlighted by a string of legislative stalemates – the 113th Congress (2013-2014) is on track to match or even surpass those dubious distinctions.

After the last Congress saw its approval ratings drop to their lowest levels, a June Gallup survey found that just 10 percent of Americans have confidence in the institution. That's the lowest percentage Gallup ever measured for Congress on this question – or, for that matter, any other American institution, including the presidency, big business, the medical profession and public schools.

When it comes to productivity, only 15 legislative items have become law under the current Congress. That's fewer than the 23 items that became law at this same point in the 112th Congress, which passed a historically low number of bills that were signed into law.

To many observers, these are signs of broken government, gerrymandered congressional districts and out-of-control partisanship on Capitol Hill.

But they're also a reflection of divided government, especially during a time of profound and rapid social change.

“The country is pretty divided in a lot of different ways, and [Congress] not doing things reflects those divisions,” said John Samples, a political scholar at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Consider these developments over the past four-plus years:

- The nation has its first African-American president who won re-election a year ago;
- The country is on track to be a majority-minority nation 30 years from now;

- Congress overhauled the country's health-care system in 2010;
- And the U.S. Supreme Court just ruled that married same-sex couples are entitled to federal benefits at a time when a majority of Americans now support gay marriage, according to national polls.

Regardless of the reason, the legislative stalemates have become the norm at a time when Democrats control the White House and Senate, while Republicans are in charge of the House of Representatives.

7.4 million college students will see their federal loan rates double on the 1st of July. CNBC's Sharon Epperson is interviewed by TODAY's Erica Hill.

Earlier this year, congressional Republicans, congressional Democrats and the Obama White House were unable to reach a solution to stop the automatic defense and other spending cuts known as sequestration.

More recently, House Republican leaders couldn't pass a farm bill because a sizable number of GOP members and almost all Democrats voted against it.

And before it left Washington for the July 4 holiday, the Democratic-led Senate failed to pass legislation to avoid interest rates on student loans doubling from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent.

Even the biggest legislative triumph so far of the 113th Congress – the Senate passing immigration reform by a 68-32 vote – appears to have hit a brick wall in the House of Representatives.

“We're going to do our own bill through regular order, and it'll be legislation that reflects the will of our majority and the will of the American people,” House Speaker John Boehner said on Thursday. “And for any legislation, including a conference report, to pass the House is going to have to be a bill that has the support of a majority of our members.”

The legislative stalemates also have cast doubt that Congress could truly revisit the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act after the Supreme Court struck part of it down.

Despite the gridlock and unpopularity, observers still believe that the previous Congress – which battled over raising the debt limit and the threat of government shutdown – was more dysfunctional than the current one.

“It can't get worse than the 112th,” said a top Democratic Senate aide. “Passing something like immigration, even only through the Senate, was a pipe dream in the 112th.”

“So I think we could be on track to be similarly unproductive, but I don't think it can get worse than the last one,” the aide added.

But to Republicans, productivity is in the eye of the beholder – especially when their party controls only one chamber of Congress.

Boehner spokesman Michael Steel touts several achievements over the past two Congresses (spending cuts, trade agreements, a transportation bill), but he says a large focus has been to stop President Barack Obama and Senate Democrats from passing parts of their agenda.

“Welcome to divided government,” he said. “A big part of our job has been to stop bad things from happening.”