

# The Washington Post

## House bills give a glimpse into the tea party's vision for America

By [David A. Fahrenthold](#), Updated: Wednesday, August 17, 7:39 AM

If the House ran America, what would America look like?

It would have no more sweeping health-care law. The House [voted to repeal that](#) in January.

It would have no more federal limits on greenhouse gases. The House [voted to ax them](#) in April.

And it would not have three government programs for homeowners in trouble on their mortgages. The House [voted](#) to [end](#) them [all](#).

These and many other changes were included in an ambitious slate of 80-plus bills passed since Republicans took control of the House at the beginning of the year.

Most of these bills will die in the Democrat-controlled Senate. Still, they are a revealing kind of vision statement — the first evidence of how a new, tea party-influenced GOP would like to reshape the country.

That vision is aimed, first, at dismantling a number of Democratic priorities. The GOP's philosophy holds that paring back an expensive and heavy-handed government bureaucracy will help restore the country's financial footing and give private businesses the freedom to grow and create jobs.

After seven months, it is still only half a vision.

On major issues such as health care, climate change and bad mortgages, the House has affirmed that some new fix would be needed — if it can ever manage to repeal the old one.

It just hasn't said exactly what those fixes should be.

“The Republican Party is sort of united in terms of what they're against. But there's not a great deal of consensus, right now, in terms of what they're for,” said [Michael D. Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute](#) and an expert on health-care reform and recent GOP history.

This month, a divided Congress finally staggered into its summer recess. Its business has been split between the terrifyingly urgent — including standoffs that threatened a government shutdown and a national default — and the purely theoretical.

The theoretical part comes because neither chamber is likely to approve big ideas dreamed up by the other. The Democrat-held Senate has reacted to this by withdrawing into legislative hibernation.

House Republicans have instead been passing bills that will tell a story — about the America they want, and can't quite get.

“The new House Republican majority was voted into office to change the way Washington does business and make the government accountable to the American people once again. Our agenda has reflected these goals,” Laena Fallon, a spokeswoman for [House Majority Leader Eric Cantor \(R-Va.\)](#), said.

But even within Republican ranks, there is a desire for more details about the party's vision for replacing Democratic policies.

Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.), one of the most conservative voices in a conservative freshman class, said that the GOP had to put forward its own solutions on issues such as health care, job creation and mortgage assistance. He said he was not convinced there was a need to take on climate change in the same way.

“Being the party of ‘no’ ... is an appropriate response” in some cases, Gowdy said. “It's not appropriate when you've been extensively critical of someone else's ideas” and have none to replace them, he said.

“For substance reasons, and for credibility reasons, we also need to have a comprehensive ... alternative that goes beyond saying, ‘Your plan is bad,’ ” Gowdy said. If that's the entirety of the GOP message, he said, “then people will be very skeptical of our ability to lead. And with good reason.”

### **More than spending cuts**

The best-known part of the House's vision has to do with spending. The House passed a [budget](#) that calls for a major overhaul of Medicare, forcing new recipients to buy private insurance after 2022. It passed, with five Democratic votes, a bill that [demanded a balanced budget](#) amendment: essentially, a spending limit written into the Constitution.

But the House's bills have gone far beyond the budget.

It has passed legislation to forbid new energy-efficiency standards for lightbulbs, and to [punish](#) shining a laser pointer beam at an airplane in flight. It voted to take away [federal funding for National Public Radio](#), and for [public financing of presidential campaigns](#).

The House also took a stand against President Obama on the military campaign in Libya, [rejecting a motion](#) to approve of U.S. involvement. And it voted to [rein in Environmental Protection Agency efforts](#) against “mountaintop removal coal mines,” by requiring the EPA to defer to decisions by state regulators.

On three major issues, the House seemed to acknowledge that simply repealing a Democratic idea might not be enough— and that it did not have its own answer yet.

On Jan. 19, for instance, 242 Republicans and three Democrats voted [to repeal the](#) landmark health-care law. For good measure, the House later voted to repeal several pieces of the law individually.

In place of the law, Republicans had said they would craft their own solutions for problems involving high costs, and the denial of coverage for preexisting conditions. Their slogan, outlined in last fall’s Pledge to America, was [“Repeal and Replace.”](#)

But so far, no replacement has appeared.

A bill that would limit liability in malpractice lawsuits has passed in committee. Other ideas are still in development, aides said.

“Is the President planning on signing repeal into law this year?” wrote Brad Dayspring, another spokesman for Cantor, in an e-mail message. “If not, seems to me there is time.”

On climate change, the EPA is now requiring larger power plants and industrial facilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in order to obtain new permits.

But many in Congress worried that the effort will drive up energy prices and kill jobs. So, in April, 236 House Republicans and 19 Democrats [voted to make the EPA stop in its tracks](#).

In place of regulations, they approved only a vaguely worded “sense of the Congress” about climate change.

“There is established scientific concern over warming of the climate system,” the bill says. It says Congress ought to attack the problem “by developing policies that do not adversely affect the American economy, energy supplies, and employment.”

But how? When? The bill doesn’t say.

And it doesn’t need to, said [Tim Phillips](#), the president of the conservative group [Americans for Prosperity](#). Phillips said his group believes simply repealing this bill — and the health-care bill — is enough for now.

“The big government assault [has been] so damaging to the economy and the government. They’re doing the right thing by just trying to stop and reverse,” Phillips said.

Environmental groups, however, have said that the House's bill would leave the U.S. powerless to fight an escalating global problem.

"They clearly aren't going to pass any legislation, themselves, that would address that pollution," said [Daniel Lashof](#), of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "So we would be in a world where climate change is accelerating, and our tools [for combating it] would be locked up."

The House has also voted to eliminate three federal programs meant to help homeowners in danger of foreclosure. Two help modify loans to create lower payments. Another gives out no-interest loans to borrowers in trouble. All have been criticized for moving too slowly and helping too few.

So, in March, the House voted to eliminate them all. The Congressional Budget Office found that could save \$2.4 billion for taxpayers.

"None of the programs ... have been successful," Michael Steel, a spokesman for House Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio), wrote in a statement. Rather "than tweaking them, our focus is helping people get jobs, so they can pay their mortgage and stay in their home."

So, if the House's bills became law, who would Americans turn to for help with their mortgages? The bills call for studies of how mortgage-relief programs could be used to help one slice of the U.S. population: veterans, active-duty service members and their families.

For everybody else, the House bill says the best recourse would be the House itself.

"The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development shall publish to its Website on the World Wide Web in a prominent location, large point font, and boldface type the following statement," [one of its bills says](#).

"If you are having trouble paying your mortgage and need help contacting your lender or servicer," that statement would say, "please contact your Member of Congress."