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Snail's Pace in U.S. Senate Poses Hurdle to Effort to Reduce Deficit

By Laura Litvan and James Rowley - Jun 21, 2011

Just 18 measures have cleared Congress and become law this year, and only four of those originated in the Senate -- including two that named courthouses.

About one-third of the chamber's time has been taken up by inactive "quorum calls." Debate on one small-business measure took a month, and a handful of languishing White House nominees withdrew their names because of delayed Senate action, including Nobel Laureate and Federal Reserve board pick [Peter Diamond](#).

"It looks like the pace has slowed to a crawl," said former North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan, a onetime Democratic leader who retired in January. "Whether it's nominations or legislation, it seems there's very little effort by some to meet in the middle and compromise."

The Senate was devised by the nation's founding fathers to move slowly. This year, its inaction is especially notable, and overcoming Senate dysfunction will be one of the final hurdles confronting lawmakers seeking a deal to lift the ceiling to avoid a default on more than \$14 trillion in [U.S. debt](#).

Beyond the debt limit, the chamber faces unfinished business on energy, immigration, transportation and education.

Senators offer various reasons for their chamber's slow pace, including increased partisanship, re-election politics, and the decline of centrists willing to compromise.

All in Play

Each of those elements can play a role in slowing the legislative calendar. The major challenge facing this Senate is that all of them are in play.

Senator [Mike Lee](#) of [Utah](#), a first-term Republican, said he's surprised to see the Senate spending so much time doing so little. "It's what someone could perhaps call filler," he said. "I'm not calling all of it that, but it's odd to me that given the enormity of what we're facing that we're not having more debate and discussion focused on the debt."

He rejects the criticism of those who say Tea Party-backed freshmen -- including himself -- won't bend

on policy and are the logjam's chief cause. "Compromise has two sides," he said. "If the Democrats' idea of compromise is that we have to move and they don't, that's not going to work for me."

Gang Efforts

In an effort to jumpstart legislation, some senators have formed small, bipartisan "gangs," which tend to begin with vows to reach agreements and end in acrimony. The so-called "Gang of Six," created to broker a deal on lifting the debt ceiling, stalled amid disagreements and has been superseded by the bipartisan group of Senate and House members working with Vice President Joe Biden.

Senator [Bob Corker](#), a Tennessee Republican, said both parties bear blame for the Senate's inaction. He also said negotiations over [deficit reduction](#) and lifting the debt ceiling are taking "all of the oxygen" out of the air. "Neither side of the aisle really wants there to be a robust debate, tough votes to be taken on where we go as a country," Corker said. "Basically, we are cooling our heels."

In 2010, the Senate's record included passage of a health-care overhaul, a rewrite of financial-services rules and a \$60 billion measure funding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

This January, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, and Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#), a Kentucky Republican, heralded changes designed to speed Senate work and forge a bipartisan truce.

'Gentleman's Agreement'

They hatched a "gentleman's agreement" to curb the minority party's use of the filibuster -- endless debate -- to block legislation. In exchange, Reid agreed to allow more debate on Republican amendments to bills. They also pushed through a measure to abolish the secret "holds" that allow a single senator to anonymously block a nominee.

Those moves, Republicans said, are being undermined by Reid's decision to embrace a timid agenda.

With the seats of 23 Democratic senators up for [election](#) next year, and only 10 Republicans, Reid has shielded Democrats from taking tough votes, said Senator [Charles Grassley](#), an Iowa Republican. After criticizing a House-passed budget blueprint that included \$6 trillion in spending cuts and a plan to privatize Medicare, Democrats never introduced their own plan, sparing their side criticism over fiscal choices and preventing Republicans from offering amendments that might be used against Democrats, he said.

'It's Irresponsible'

"The less votes the Democrats cast, the less they can be challenged in the next election," Grassley said. "It's no way to run a railroad and it's irresponsible not to do things that are more beefy."

Democrats say such criticism is unfair. The Senate has approved a \$34.6 billion measure for the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), an overhaul of patent law and other measures that are awaiting House action. Republicans also continue to obstruct some legislation and slow action on others, said [Jon Summers](#), a Reid spokesman.

The Senate “is not functioning well, the way it should, obviously, when you’ve got threats of filibuster, preventing, slowing down or obstructing,” said Senator Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat.

The Reid-McConnell accord on filibusters had limits: It didn’t address efforts to block legislation on a final vote and didn’t end the ability of a single senator to hold up action.

Patriot Act

That happened last month when freshman Senator Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican, stalled renewal of the Patriot Act, which gives law enforcement powers for terrorism investigations, until Reid and McConnell agreed to allow him to introduce two amendments. Those amendments failed and the new version of the Patriot Act passed just hours before the old law expired.

Republican leaders are continuing to thwart a vote on former Edison International Chief Executive Officer John Bryson, Obama’s choice for Commerce Department Secretary until the White House forwards pending trade deals for [South Korea](#), [Panama](#) and [Colombia](#). They also say they won’t approve anyone to head a new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, part of the financial overhaul, until the bureau’s powers are restructured.

The stalemate is a relief to some, coming after Democratic passage of major initiatives in 2009 and 2010. “If the legislature must be in session, be thankful when it doesn’t do much,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute in [Washington](#), which promotes limited government.

David Rohde, a political scientist at [Duke University](#) in Durham, [North Carolina](#), said Senate inaction is driven in part by the departure in recent elections of political moderates such as Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee of [Rhode Island](#) and Democratic Senator Evan Bayh of [Indiana](#).

“The reason that the Senate has become more polarized is that less extreme members have been replaced by more extreme members,” Rohde said.

The lack of Senate action poses risks for Democrats, said Alan Brinkley, a history professor at [Columbia University](#) in [New York](#), because they aren’t offering policy alternatives, he said.

“The difference between the two parties is that the Republicans have a program -- an ambitious and controversial one,” said Brinkley. “The Democrats don’t really have any goals as far as I can see, besides stopping the Republicans.”

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