



Why a GOP Congress Will Need to Focus on Jobs

By [Rob Garver](#),
October 29, 2014

This is the second in a series of articles about how Republicans in Congress would handle pressing policy issues if they win control of the Senate. Read our [first piece, an overview, here](#).

In some respects, the top Republicans in Congress have had things easy these past several years. With Democrats in control of the Senate and the White House, and a House majority largely beholden to the GOP's extreme elements, expectations were low for getting a lot done.

That situation has allowed GOP leaders in both houses the leeway to criticize the Obama administration while not actually requiring much lawmaking. Nowhere has this been truer than with economic policy and job creation.

The soundtrack of the nation's long, slow slog out of the Great Recession has been congressional Republicans' variations on a single theme: The Obama administration's policies have failed to deliver sufficient economic growth and have not created enough jobs.

Even now, with the U.S. economy creating more than 200,000 jobs per month, the refrain is largely unchanged.

"The president can talk about an improving economy, but try telling that to those Americans who are suffering so much in the Obama economy," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) [said earlier this month](#). "What about the poor and middle class who can't find jobs or whose wages have barely budged?"

[At a campaign rally this week](#), House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) said the president's policies are "killing the job market, killing the opportunity to get a higher wage."

To date, McConnell and Boehner have largely been able to get away with providing more criticism than viable proposals for improving public policy. McConnell, as Senate Minority Leader, has more power to kill legislation he doesn't like than to pass legislation he does. Boehner has a fractious GOP conference that has often rejected moderate proposals. Yet because he also has a convenient scapegoat in the Democratic Senate, Boehner has allowed the passage of numerous so-called jobs bills that he knew were poison to congressional Democrats and the White House – and he could blame their failure on Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV).

If the GOP winds up in control of both the House and Senate in 2015, though, McConnell and Boehner will be in a very different position: They'll need to attempt to pass bills that have a chance of becoming law. Given the noise both lawmakers have made about the economy and jobs, it's difficult to imagine them not addressing the issues early on in the 114th Congress.

"With the amount of screaming Republicans have done over job creation, there has to be some sort of action if they take over the Senate," said John Hudak, a fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. "There obviously has to be something more than there has been and, to be frank, more than what has happened in the House."

What exactly they would be able to accomplish with control of the House and a narrow majority in the Senate, however, is unclear.

"Sometimes 'majority' and 'control' aren't exactly the same thing," said Mark Calabria, director of financial regulation studies at the Cato Institute and a former GOP staffer on the Senate Banking Committee. "We know the Republicans will be nowhere near 60," he added, referring to the number of senators needed to break the minority party's filibuster of legislation its members oppose.

There will, without doubt, be political show votes. "Yes, you'll have some things done that the president won't sign," he said. "Yes, you'll have a lot of talk about repealing Obamacare."

The result, though, may be at least moderately good news for the jobless and struggling. A Republican Congress may be forced to offer an economic growth and jobs package that will not only clear a Democratic filibuster in the Senate, but avoid a presidential veto.

One possibility is the GOP tries to come together and offer something like a 2014 version of the 2012 JOBS Act, which had provisions to stimulate jobs growth through reductions in regulatory requirements.

"The JOBS Act went through a Democratic Senate but was largely House-driven," said Calabria. He expects that McConnell, who is a strong partisan in his public statements but a dealmaker behind the scenes, will likely push for compromise legislation. "Despite some animosity and rhetoric, my expectation is that McConnell tries to reach some accommodation with the president," Calabria said.

Hudak, of Brookings, said that if McConnell and Boehner were to come to the White House with a jobs bill that offers pro-growth proposals and is free of politically driven riders, such as anti-abortion riders and Obamacare repeal provisions, it would be hard for the president to veto. As long as Congress presents "a clean jobs bill," it would likely become law, he said.

Another issue virtually certain to come up for debate is tax reform. The U.S. tax code hasn't been substantially revised in nearly 30 years; members of both parties have been clear about the need for reform.

“You are going to see a lot of tax cut legislation coming up,” predicted Hudak. “If Republicans are smart about it, they might take one shot at their version of comprehensive tax reform, which would certainly fail, but then they could start offering targeted tax cuts to certain constituencies – to groups they think they can get some traction with and force the Democrats to take a stand. It will be easy for Democrats to defeat a Republican comprehensive tax reform proposal. It’s a lot harder to defeat a specific cut for, say, manufacturing businesses.”

A Republican Congress, of course, would have to do all this while dealing with must-pass bills that will by themselves stir up controversy. For instance, another debt ceiling vote is approaching before the end of the summer of 2015. The budget deal the government is currently operating under will also need to be renewed, which will open up discussion of the Budget Control Act and the sequestration of funding to both the Pentagon and various Democratic priorities.

As one close observer of the process noted, it’s one thing for House Republicans to pass the budget plan put forward by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) knowing full well it would never clear the Senate. It’s another thing entirely to pass it when you know you’ll eventually need to specify the social services cuts necessary to make it balance.