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## MAINE VOICES

# A 'Do-Nothing Congress:' Why now?

A number of pressing issues are getting no attention at all from the GOP leadership.

Congress is in recess. Again. So far, the House of Representatives has been in session only 21 days in 2006.

If the House sticks to the leadership's schedule for the rest of the year, we will meet for a grand total of 93 voting days.

This abysmal tally is worse than the 108-day record set by the Congress that President Harry Truman labeled "Do-Nothing" during his 1948 reelection campaign.

And even these numbers are misleading, since 24 of those 93 days are partial days when leadership schedules no votes until after 6:30 p.m.

Important legislation was considered on only 13 days. On other days, we took up such weighty matters as naming post offices and congratulating the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Why this leisurely pace? It's not that members of Congress are on the golf courses, despite what the lobbying scandal may suggest.

No, the problem is that congressional Republicans have little interest in finding solutions to our toughest, most controversial issues - health care, energy, climate change and tax policies, among other things - because the answers depend on public intervention, shared sacrifices and bipartisan support.

They believe that they can and should govern without any input from the minority party.

Congressional Republicans, moreover, cling to an ideology that rejects the value of government; instead they either deny problems exist or assume (without evidence) that tax cuts for the wealthy and the private market will cure our ills.

Consider some matters that

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rep. Tom Allen**, a Democrat, represents Maine's First District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Congress has refused to take up.

■ **Climate change:** Until recently, the administration simply denied the problem existed.

Even now, energy laws and regulations are crafted by and for the fossil fuel industries; the development of alternative, sustainable fuels is neglected; energy conservation and efficiency efforts are pathetic; no relief for soaring fuel prices is considered.



Art by Geoffrey Moss

■ **Medicare Part D:** The drug benefit plan for seniors and disabled people is a wildly expensive, bureaucratic nightmare.

The mess is the inevitable result of a fatally flawed approach that put the profits of pharmaceutical companies and the insurance industry ahead of the interests of beneficiaries and taxpayers.

Yet, congressional leaders have stated that they have no intention of considering legislation to fix the problems.

■ **The war in Iraq:** With its

control over the purse and its power to require disclosure, Congress has the ability and the responsibility to oversee all the important operations of the executive branch.

Even so, congressional oversight committees have utterly failed to fully investigate why the intelligence on which we relied to justify the invasion of Iraq was so wrong, or properly probed the way billions of dollars are being spent on the war.

■ **Health insurance and health costs:** American businesses are competing globally at a terrible disadvantage - the crushing cost of health insurance.

The cost of every General Motors car, for example, includes about \$1,600 for this employee benefit, a cost not borne by companies operating in countries where health benefits are paid by the government.

Likewise, when I talk to small-business owners in Maine, the cost of health insurance is topic No. 1.

Nor is the American system of health care particularly effective. We spend more per person than virtually any place on Earth, yet on average we are sicker and die earlier than people in most modern states.

These and other examples of lost opportunities demonstrate that there is plenty to keep Congress in session for more than 93 days this year.

Many constructive, feasible bills are awaiting action, including several I have introduced on Medicare Part D, employment-based health insurance, the war in Iraq and other matters.

All my proposals are based on discussions I have had with Maine people. A "Do-Nothing Congress" means that they and other Americans are being cheated of the chance to solve the problems that plague our nation.

- Special to the Press Herald