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Top Votes in Congress: 2014

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If the record of the current Republican-led House is a guide, the Environmental Protection Agency, Affordable Care Act and Dodd-Frank financial-regulation law will be frequently under attack should the GOP win enough Senate seats on Nov. 4 to gain full control in the new 114th Congress next year.

House Republican majorities have voted at least 104 times during the 113th Congress to weaken the EPA and the laws it oversees, 24 times to dismantle the 2010 health law and 18 times to roll back Dodd-Frank rules for policing Wall Street. The campaign against Dodd-Frank has included six votes to neuter the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau created by the law to protect households in everyday financial transactions.

While these legislative priorities have faltered in the current Democratic-led Senate, they would move forward in a Congress totally run by Republicans, predicts Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who is in line to become majority leader if he is re-elected next month and his party wins control of the Senate.

"We're going to go after (Democrats) on health care, on financial services, on the Environmental Protection Agency," he told a conference of prosperous Republican donors hosted June 15 by David and Charles Koch at a resort near San Diego.

If McConnell were to muster enough votes to get legislation past Democratic procedural maneuvers, President Obama could use vetoes to protect cornerstone laws and programs. The EPA was established by President Richard Nixon's executive order in 1970, Dodd-Frank was Congress's main response to the 2008-09 financial crash and the ACA, with 7.3 million paid enrollees in state and federal insurance exchanges as of mid-August, is Obama's signature domestic law.

The environmental votes account for one of every 11 House roll calls since January 2013. They occurred on GOP attempts to weaken laws including the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act in order to advance proposals to expand offshore and Arctic drilling, expedite mountaintop mining, build the Keystone XL Pipeline, devolve pesticide and coal-ash regulation to the states and increase logging in national forests, among other objectives.

The 104 anti-EPA votes included 40 roll calls on GOP-sponsored bills and amendments, including 12 intended to block action to deal with climate change, and 64 votes on Democratic measures in defense of existing environmental policies.

It is important for Republicans to block a “radical environmental agenda” by the president that slows economic growth and costs jobs, said Rep. Jackie Walorski, R-Ind., in debate March 5 over power-plant emissions and climate-change.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., charged in the same debate that the GOP-led House had “entered the intellectual wilderness — the Flat Earth Society” in its denial of climate-change.

This pre-Election Day report spotlights 24 of this year’s most newsworthy votes in Congress, including roll calls on House GOP efforts to exert congressional control over the independent Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and prohibit funding of Department of Energy and Army Corp of Engineers efforts to address climate change.

Also charted here are House votes to authorize U.S. military support of Syrian rebel forces; end the administration’s “dreamers” program granting legal status to some youths who entered the country as undocumented children; pursue a GOP lawsuit alleging that President Obama overstepped his constitutional authority; restrict National Security Agency collection of data on Americans and establish a committee to investigate the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

This report also covers Senate votes on Democratic proposals to allow widespread student-loan refinancing and counter the Supreme Court’s “Hobby Lobby” ruling on birth-control coverage under the Affordable Care Act, as well as votes on bipartisan measures intended to improve veterans’ health care, increase energy efficiency, allow military sexual-assault cases to be prosecuted outside the chain of command and address problems posed by the increased number of illegal child immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

Finally, the report includes votes in both chambers on raising the minimum wage, establishing male-female pay equity for the same work, extending jobless benefits for the long-term unemployed, suspending the national-debt limit and passing a five-year farm and food bill.

Here are summaries of the 24 issues:

In the House

1. New Farm, Food Law: The House on Jan. 29 adopted, 251-166, the final version of a five-year farm and food bill with a budget of nearly \$100 billion annually. A yes vote supported the bill (HR 2642) to cut food stamp spending by 1 percent, boost farm exports, expand crop insurance, end direct payments to growers, fund conservation programs and spur rural development.

In the Senate

1. New Farm, Food Law: Voting 68-32, the Senate on Feb. 4 gave final congressional approval to a five-year farm and food bill budgeted at nearly \$100 billion annually. A yes vote was to send President Obama a package (HR 2642) that would fund farm subsidies, cut food stamps by 1 percent, expand crop insurance, end most direct payments to growers, promote soil conservation and wetlands protection and spur rural development.

In the House

2. To Suspend the Debt Limit: The House on Feb. 11 voted, 221-201, to suspend the national debt limit until March 16, 2015, allowing the Treasury to borrow above the existing \$17.2 trillion ceiling in order to pay bills incurred by Congress and the executive branch. A yes vote was to send S 540 to the Senate.

3. Consumer Financial Protection

Bureau: The House on Feb. 27 voted, 232-182, to bring the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau under congressional control. A yes vote backed a bill (HR 3193) to limit the bureau's rulemaking authority, replace its director with a five-person council and make its funding subject to the congressional appropriations process.

4. Extended Jobless Benefits: The House on March 12 defeated, 187-228, a Democratic bid to amend a GOP bill on separation of powers (HR 4138) to restore benefits for 1.5 million of the long-term unemployed whose eligibility for checks expired Dec. 28. A yes vote was to restore benefits that Republicans said should be "paid for" elsewhere in the budget.

5. Equal Pay for Women: The House on April 7 defeated, 179-217, a Democratic motion to sidetrack a bill on accounting rules (HR 1872) until the Census Bureau reported that women had reached equal pay with men for full-time, year-round work. A yes vote backed the measure over a GOP argument it was "totally extraneous" to the underlying bill.

6. Select Benghazi Committee: On a vote of 232-186 on May 8, the House GOP set up a select committee with no fixed ending date to probe government actions surrounding the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on Sept. 11, 2012. A yes vote was to adopt H Res 567.

7. Minimum Wage, Pay Equity: The House on May 22 defeated, 194-227, a Democratic bid to prohibit the awarding of government contracts under the fiscal 2015 military budget (HR 4435) to companies that do not pay at least \$10.10 per hour or pay male and female employees equally for the same work. A yes vote was to adopt the motion.

In the Senate

2. To Suspend Debt Limit: Voting 55-43, the Senate on Feb. 12 passed a bill (S 540) to suspend the federal debt limit until March 16, 2015, so that the Treasury could borrow to pay bills already incurred by the government. A yes vote was to send the measure to President Obama.

3. Sexual Assaults in the Military: The Senate on March 6 failed, 55-45, to reach 60 votes needed to advance a bill (S 1752) that would transfer the military's handling of sexual-assault cases from the chain of command to outside military prosecutors, who would decide whether to press charges. The Senate then unanimously passed a separate bill giving the military more tools for dealing with widespread soldier-on-soldier sexual misconduct. A yes vote was to remove prosecutorial decisions from the chain of command.

4. Extended Jobless Benefits: The Senate on April 7 passed, 59-38, a bill providing aid to millions of the long-term unemployed whose eligibility for extended jobless benefits had expired. The bill would have made the benefits retroactively available from Dec. 28 through May 31. A yes vote was to send HR 3979 to the House, where it was shelved.

5. Federal Minimum Wage: The Senate on April 30 failed, 54-42, to reach 60 votes needed to end Republican blockage of a bill to increase the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 per hour to \$10.10 over two years. A yes vote backed a bill also raising the "tipped minimum wage" received by restaurant workers, hotel valets and others. (S 2223)

6. Energy Efficiency: The Senate on May 12 failed, 55-36, to end Republican blockage of a bill to promote energy efficiency in residential, commercial and industrial sectors and throughout the federal government, the nation's largest energy consumer. Republicans wanted to offer amendments to expedite natural gas exports and restrict regulation of emissions from coal-burning power plants. A yes vote was to advance S 2262, which counted on voluntary compliance, not mandates, to reach its goals.

In the House

8. Domestic Spy Powers: The House on May 22 voted, 303-121, to curb the National Security Agency's authority to collect bulk data on Americans' telecommunications under laws such as the USA Patriot Act. A yes vote was to pass HR 3361 over civil libertarians' arguments that it had too many loopholes to be effective.

9. Ban on Climate-Change Funding: The House on July 10 voted, 229-188, to bar funding in the fiscal 2015 energy and water appropriations bill (HR 4923) of Department of Energy and Army Corps of Engineers policies to address climate change that are based on "biased" science. A yes vote backed the prohibition on climate-change funding.

10. House Suit Against President: On a nearly party-line vote of 225-201, the House on July 30 backed the Republican majority's plan to file a lawsuit against President Obama on grounds he exceeded his constitutional authority by acting on his own to delay the Affordable Care Act requirement that many employers provide health insurance for workers. A yes vote was to authorize a civil suit in federal court. (H Res 676)

11. Ending "Dreamers" Program: The House on Aug. 1 voted, 216-192, to phase out the administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, under which individuals brought illegally to the U.S. as children — so-called "dreamers"— can qualify for work permits and temporary protection from deportation. A yes vote was to send HR 5272 to the Senate, where it is likely to die.

12. Support of Syrian Rebels: The House on Sept. 17 authorized, 273-156, U.S. training and arming of Syrian rebels considered relatively moderate to fight the militant group known as Islamic State. A yes vote backed the amendment to HJ Res 124, with 159 Republicans and 114 Democrats giving their support.

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In the Senate

7. Student Loan Refinancing, Millionaire's Tax: The Senate on June 11 failed, 56-38, to reach 60 votes needed to end Republican blockage of a bill allowing tens of millions of individuals to refinance their student loans at current interest rates over the next two years. To offset its cost, the bill would impose a 30-percent minimum income tax rate on households with at least \$1 million in investment and salary income. A yes vote was to advance S 2432.

8. Veterans' Health Care: The Senate on June 11 passed, 93-3, a bill to provide outside healthcare options for veterans while authorizing \$500 million to hire more doctors and nurses to cope with a surge of ailing veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan and other wars. (HR 3230)

9. Nullification of Hobby Lobby Decision: The Senate on July 16 failed, 56-43, to reach 60 votes for ending a GOP filibuster of a bill to nullify the Supreme Court decision in June that closely held, for-profit firms such as Hobby Lobby could refuse on religious grounds to pay for birth-control coverage required under the Affordable Care Act. A yes vote was to advance the bill (S 2578) prohibiting employers except religious institutions from refusing to pay for health services required by law.

10. Funds to Ease Border Crisis: The Senate on July 31 failed, 50-44, to reach 60 votes needed to overcome Republican budget objections and advance a bill providing \$2.7 billion in deficit spending to help agencies deal with tens of thousands of unaccompanied child immigrants from Central America. A yes vote was to advance S 2648.

11. Female-Male Pay Equity: The Senate on Sept. 15 failed, 52-40, to reach 60 votes needed to end Republican blockage of a Democratic bill to close loopholes in the 1963 Equal Pay Act and give women more legal tools for gaining pay equity with male co-workers. A yes vote was to advance S 2199.

12. Stopgap Spending, Middle East War: Voting 78-22, the Senate on Sept. 18 joined the House in passing a stopgap funding measure for the first 10 weeks of fiscal 2015 that authorized U.S. support for Syrian rebels fighting Islamic State forces. A yes vote was to send HJ Res 124 to President Obama.