

# Congress Needs A Five-Day Work Week

## Lee Hamilton Commentary

Looking at ways to make Congress a stronger, more effective institution, it's easy for reformers to get dispirited by the sheer complexity of the task. How do you even begin to fix the budget process, or reduce the hold of campaign money on members' attention, or change the lopsided power equation between Congress and the White House? Yet there is one small improvement that Congress could put into effect right now that would go a long way toward making it a more successful body: extend the congressional work week.

I don't mean to suggest that members of Congress are sloughing off. Far from it: they work extremely hard. It's just that much of their work involves tasks other than legislating. Most of the year, they devote only three days a week to this fundamental responsibility; the rest of the time, they're raising money, giving speeches, politicking in the district, traveling on fact-finding visits, meeting with lobbyists and constituents, and attending to the myriad other responsibilities that contemporary members of Congress believe to be part of their job.

Only during the middle days of the week is their attention focused on the hard and often tedious work of crafting legislative language on difficult policy issues — the core, in the end, of their constitutional reason for being.

Even then, if you spend some time on Capitol Hill, you cannot help but be impressed by the frenzied pace that legislators maintain during the few days they're there. They rush from one committee hearing to another; they hold countless meetings with lobbyists or groups of constituents, interrupted by a quick dash to the floor for votes; they give speeches, spend much time with the media, attend receptions and fundraising events, and put out dozens of telephone calls. The members of Congress I meet generally seem very tired, and it's no wonder, given the schedule they keep.

Which is why I often think of a piece of advice I got from the great New York Times newsman James "Scotty" Reston shortly after I arrived in Congress in the mid-1960s. "Make sure," he told me, "that you take the time to put your feet up on the table, look out the window, and think." When I repeated this to some members of Congress recently, they just laughed — they recognized good advice when they heard it, but also recognized that getting even a few minutes to reflect at peace seems an impossibility these days.

The manic schedule that members of Congress maintain costs them more than the chance to get their thoughts in order. I would argue, in fact, that it hurts their ability to be effective as legislators. For the simple truth is that good legislating takes time. It demands the patient pursuit of consensus, the working through of alternatives, the ability to test ideas in debate, and a willingness to build the broad consensus that is necessary for effective legislation.

All of this is pretty much impossible if you usually devote only three — or three and a half — days a week to the work of the Congress. Many members don't have the opportunity to get to know one another well, and therefore to build the trust required to work across party and ideological lines. Time for debate and deliberation — key constitutional responsibilities — gets constrained.

The opportunities multiply for pursuing delaying tactics, playing against the clock, or, in the Senate, threatening a filibuster. Leaders have more leeway to circumvent good democratic process by cramming complex legislation into last-minute, must-pass legislative vehicles. The cramped congressional schedule, in other words, curtails the deliberative process and

encourages the dysfunctional habits that the American people have come to identify with Congress.

This is why returning to a five-day work week on Capitol Hill, at least for three out of every four weeks, is so important.

I recognize that it is politically difficult to pull off — the jet airplane has made returning home to the district so easy that members of Congress feel they must do so every Thursday evening or risk alienating their constituents and the local media. But if they're interested in producing good legislation, there is no substitute for time spent doing so.

A longer work week in Washington would give them the chance to build the ties they need to work together, to craft legislation without constantly looking at the clock, to overcome the delaying tactics that have so frustrated policy-makers in recent years, and to make more rapid progress on the truly difficult issues that confront Congress with such regularity these days. It might even, every so often, give them a chance to put their feet up on the table, look out the window, and spend some time pondering what's best for the American people.

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For a photo of Hamilton, see: [http://www.centeroncongress.org/about/lhh\\_bio.htm](http://www.centeroncongress.org/about/lhh_bio.htm)