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Working hard or hardly working?

By: [Jake Sherman](#)
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Like most Americans, members of the [House](#) are expected to report promptly — no excuses — when summoned by their bosses for the start of another workweek. One difference: For lawmakers, starting time doesn't come until about 6:30 Tuesday evening.

After taking control of the House in 2006 — and again when [President Barack Obama](#) was elected president in 2008 — [Majority Leader Steny Hoyer](#) (D-Md.) boasted that lawmakers would work four or five days a week to bring change to America.

But midway through Obama's first year in office, Hoyer's House has settled into a more leisurely routine. Members usually arrive for the first vote of the week as the sun sets on Tuesdays, and they're usually headed back home before it goes down again on Thursdays.

Since the House returned for its fall session on Sept. 8, it has stuck around to vote on a Friday just once: to approve a 5.8 percent increase in [Congress's](#) own budget.

A Democratic leadership aide vehemently defended the schedule, saying members shouldn't be kept in Washington for four or five days when work can be completed in fewer.

And with health care reform, climate change legislation and a slew of

appropriations bills lined up in the Senate, House Democrats know that a longer workweek in their chamber might do little more than add to the backlog.

Asked about the abbreviated workweeks, Hoyer said Tuesday: "I think you understand why we're doing it." He pointed to the appropriations bills stalled in the Senate, but he didn't cast blame at senators for moving so slowly. "It takes a long time to do it," he said.

"We'd all love to see some bills back [from the Senate] quickly," said a Democratic aide.

The House got off to a fast start this year, approving a stimulus plan, an omnibus spending bill and climate change legislation, as well as getting health care reform bills through three committees. But now lawmakers and staff are enjoying an Indian summer of sorts; Mondays are dead, and Fridays have the Hill set clad in jeans and oxfords, awaiting the next vote four long days

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away.

Two-and-a-half-day workweeks are not exactly what Hoyer had planned.

In December 2006, as he prepared to take the reins as majority leader, Hoyer said lawmakers should expect to be on duty in the House from 6:30 p.m. on Mondays to around 2 p.m. on Fridays.

When Hoyer released his 2009 legislative calendar last December, he said: “The American people voted decisively for change this November, and we will work hard to make that change a reality.”

According to that calendar — no longer on Hoyer’s website but cached through Google — the House was to have been in session 120 days by now. In fact, it’s been in session for 113 days — and many of those have been brief.

Under the original 2009 schedule, the House was to have had votes on seven of the past eight business days. As it turned out, the House voted on just five of those eight days and worked 25 hours and 43 minutes on passing legislative material — an average of three hours and 36 minutes of legislative debate and voting each day, according to a POLITICO analysis of House voting records. The calculation doesn’t include special-order and one-minute speeches, essentially colloquies used by members to advance positions or score political points.

Of course, time on the floor debating and voting on bills doesn’t represent the totality of the congressional workload. Members of Congress meet with constituents, special-interest groups, advisers and colleagues to discuss legislation.

“We’re in the middle of a health care reform bill,” said Maryland Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. “This is a 24/7 operation.”

At busy times of the year — particularly when lawmakers are trying to finish work in time for a recess — the legislating hours can be long, at least by Hill standards. On a particularly busy week in July, the House spent 36 hours and 11 minutes on legislative debate and voting — an average of seven hours and 15 minutes a day considering laws.

Moreover, Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) said, lawmakers suffer from the misconception that they’re off duty when they’re back home. In fact, he and other

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lawmakers say, they put in a lot of time in their districts meeting with constituents and doing other work.

But asked about the short weeks in Washington, Cummings punted.

"I think you need to talk to Hoyer about that," he said. "Don't you worry, you'll get your money's worth."

Hoyer spokeswoman Katie Grant said complaints about the House schedule are nothing new.

"Every fall we can count [on] two things: The leaves change colors, and stories on the floor schedule change from Congress doing too much to [Congress] doing too little," she said. "In fact, we have spent a great deal of time in session and gotten a tremendous amount of work done this year, and members are continuing to work both in Washington and their districts."

Indeed, Rep. Scott Garrett (R-N.J.) was miffed Tuesday morning when the House Financial Services Committee scheduled a hearing on what was supposed to be a "member-travel day."

"They hammered on us, and they should look in the mirror to see how they're running the show now," Garrett said of the Democrats.

But while some GOP lawmakers grumbled in 2006 when Hoyer first talked of a five-day-a-week schedule, at least one was willing to look at the bright side Tuesday.

"Two and a half days a week is plenty of time to consider the ideas coming out of this Democrat-led House," said Rep. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.). "Imagine the damage they could do with five-day workweeks."

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