

Presidential politics likely to frame congressional debate in 2008

by Marc_H._Morial

With the 110th Congress convening soon, the race for president is likely to heavily influence activities on Capitol Hill in 2008.

From the president's annual State of the Union Address and submission of the fiscal 2009 federal budget to formulation of a congressional budget resolution and allocation of funds to federal agencies, it all will take place in anticipation of an electoral and largely partisan storm front.

This year's session is "do or die" time for major bills introduced last year. Big picture policy issues and unfinished business from last year will likely dominate the political landscape, leaving little room for innovative or breakthrough domestic and foreign policy.

Storm clouds hovering over this year's session include, first and foremost, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The costs associated with them and what course to take will be major issues in the presidential race and key influences on funding decisions. A new Joint Economic Committee report puts the total cost at \$3.5 trillion if the nation stays the course.

The home foreclosure crisis also threatens to keep the economy under a cloud. According to the latest RealtyTrac data, one foreclosure filing occurred for every 196 U.S. households in the third quarter of 2007. The impact of the crisis has spurred introduction of and action on many legislative initiatives, including ones involving anti-predatory lending strategies.

Legislation to address an acute lack of affordable housing for the poor also faces an uncertain fate this year. The House-passed National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act of 2007 would assist in the construction, rehabilitation and preservation of 1.5 million affordable housing units over the next decade but it awaits Senate action.

A big question mark is whether presidential politics will spur national discussion of how to put 36 million Americans living in poverty on the road to financial independence. Nearly one-fourth of blacks and over one-third of black children live in poverty.

And employment does not guarantee escape. In 2006, 7.5 percent of working families were living below the poverty threshold. Those with a minority parent were three to four times as likely to be poor as those with a white parent. Addressing poverty requires a multifaceted approach, but raising the minimum wage is a place to start.

Last year saw the first increase in the minimum wage in 10 years, from \$5.15 to \$7.25 an hour. It is the National Urban League's hope that legislation indexing the minimum wage to the inflation rate will be introduced so that poor and working families no longer have to depend on the whims of Congress.

Despite the fact that 47 million Americans lack health insurance, Congress is unlikely to act on universal health care proposals but the presidential race is likely to raise the issue's visibility, setting the stage for debate in 2009.

With 14 vacancies remaining on federal appeals courts nationwide, little time remains to fill them. The Senate confirmed five appeals court nominees in 2007 but the judicial nomination process is likely to grind to a halt until a new president is elected.

On the education front, after a number of congressional committee hearings, efforts to reauthorize the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act are likely to come face to face with presidential politics this year. While the law expired last September, it provided for an automatic one-year extension. No legislation has been introduced in either chamber but negotiations continue. Bills are expected to be introduced in 2008, but it is unclear if Congress will be able to complete action in an election year.

Progress was made toward reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, the law that provides for expanded access of low- and middle-income students to higher education.

Key issues include: controlling college costs; simplifying the student aid process; improving teacher training; increasing the Pell grant; and expanding college preparation programs for low-income students, among others.

The Workforce Investment Act, which is the nation's front-line employment and training vehicle for youth and dislocated workers, desperately needs more congressional champions.

Without a reauthorization, funding for employment and training services becomes increasingly vulnerable to the budget ax.

For thousands of low-income Gulf Coast residents who are still - after more than two years - trying to find their way home after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the sun won't shine until Congress completes work on hurricane housing recovery legislation, which awaits Senate action.

And finally, supporters of the D.C. House Voting Rights Act in 2008 are going to try to break a Senate roadblock and get the bill on the chamber's floor for a final vote. In 2007, the Senate failed to overcome a filibuster - the first of a voting rights bill since the end of segregation by a mere three votes. The House had already passed the bill months earlier.

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