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With new year comes new Congress and many challenges

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 14, 2013

The new Congress was sworn in to office Jan. 3 and President Barack Obama's inauguration will be held Jan. 21. There is a Wells Fargo bank exactly halfway between the White House and the Capitol building, and it is easy to find. The question on everyone's mind in D.C., however, is whether or not the Republican-controlled House will find a way to meet the president halfway politically on a range of issues facing the nation.

The fiscal cliff negotiations at year's end were not promising. "If the last Congress was the do-nothing Congress, this one may well be the crisis Congress," said Matthew Green, professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington. "Automatic spending cuts will go into effect in just two months, and the debt limit will be breached in three. Debate over these deadlines will likely consume Congress' time between now and then. And what do you want to bet that just before those deadlines go into effect, the House and Senate will avert an impending disaster by kicking the can down the road only a tiny bit further, then repeat the process in a few months' time?"

Indeed, the difficulty reaching consensus that was just witnessed in the fiscal cliff negotiations may plague a host of other issues.

After November's election, in which Obama garnered 71 percent of the Latino vote, several prominent Republicans said their party had to do better among this fastest-growing demographic and promised to embrace efforts to reform immigration policy. But Green warns the issue is very complicated.

"Immigration reform has a better chance passing in this Congress than the last one, but the way forward won't be easy," he said. "If a reform bill will help win Latino votes, both parties have a strong incentive to pass one, Republicans especially. But immigration pits many powerful constituencies against each other, including labor unions, business owners, party activists, Hispanics, and residents of border states. Given these difficult and complex politics, and the polarized climate in Washington right now, party leaders in Washington may not have the will or the capability to pass immigration reform."

Tom Perriello, a former Democratic congressman from Virginia who now leads the Center for American Progress Action Fund, agrees with Green.

"The short answer is that the fight [for comprehensive reform] is worth having but the prospects are dim unless the Republicans have a 'come to Jesus' moment," Perriello said. "What we've seen in these fiscal cliff negotiations is that a large number of House Republicans don't care about what's good for the country or even for the GOP as a whole, only about avoiding a primary challenger."

Perriello said the politics of immigration will only change "if there is a real change in the spiritual and moral landscape."

Of course, the fiscal cliff bill passed only after Speaker of the House John Boehner, R-Ohio, bucked a previous

self-imposed rule and allowed the bill to come to the floor even though it lacked majority support from within his own caucus. It is difficult to see how he can do that again on a fiscal issue like the debt ceiling and maintain his speakership, but he might be able to bring an immigration bill to the floor, mindful that it would need only 30 or so Republican votes to pass. Most of his caucus could oppose it, but they could also hope that the next GOP presidential candidate would not have the anti-immigrant albatross around his neck.

The constant sense of uncertainty regarding the possibility of legislative compromise is especially problematic for certain Catholic and other charitable organizations.

"We are glad the Congress avoided the fiscal cliff, but we remain very worried about what will happen in March," Bill O'Keefe, senior director for advocacy at Catholic Relief Services, said of the many unresolved budget issues.

If sequestration takes place, across the board cuts totaling $1.2 trillion over 10 years would kick in. Most programs would see an 8.2 percent drop in their budget, including those foreign aid programs that CRS relies on for its funding.

Organizations like CRS need to plan budgets and programs in advance, and the uncertainty about funding levels makes that difficult. O'Keefe expressed similar thankfulness that the negotiations extended the Farm Bill for another year, but expressed the same worry: "We need a long-term policy."

Another aspect of the fiscal cliff deal could potentially cause direct harm to CRS and other charitable organizations. Congress limited the amount high-end taxpayers can deduct when they donate to charities.

"We are glad they maintained the deduction for most people," O'Keefe said. "And we will be watchful for any efforts to limit the deduction further in subsequent tax reform proposals."

The limits that were enacted will be especially problematic for organizations engaged in capital campaigns, such as efforts to build a new church or renovate an old one. Such efforts usually rely on large gifts from wealthy benefactors. Under the new rules, individuals making $250,000 per year and couples making $300,000 per year would face the cap on the value of their deductions. According to the Philanthropy News Digest, the cap could result in a lowering of charitable giving by anywhere from 0.4 percent to 2.3 percent. The latter amount comes to $7 billion per year.

Other issues look to be similarly contentious. In the wake of the killing of 20 schoolchildren and six adult staff members in Newtown, Conn., Obama set up a task force led by Vice President Joe Biden to recommend ways to prevent such tragedies.

"I think that the Newtown tragedy has brought us to a point of demand for new and effective restrictions on the proliferation of weapons," said Ben Palumbo, a board member at Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. Palumbo has written frequently on gun violence. "The key to all this is the necessity for various organizations clamoring for restrictions to have a united front. The Brady organization, the mayors, the police chiefs, parents' groups, faith groups -- they all need to be behind a comprehensive plan."

Arrayed against any such effort at comprehensive reforms to restrict gun ownership will be the powerful National Rifle Association.

Standing behind all particular issues is the role of the tea party in the Republican Party and whether or not it will continue to oppose virtually any efforts to find common ground with Democrats.

"It's hard to believe the tea party, to the extent it is a single entity, will have much influence in Washington going forward," Green said. "It lacks strong leadership and an organized base of power, and its brand has been badly tarnished by the sorry record of the last Congress and the ineptitude of its election candidates."

Republican efforts to retake the Senate were hobbled when tea party candidates defeated more moderate Republicans in primaries in Missouri and Indiana.

"On the other hand, there remain many members of Congress, particularly in the House, who got where they are with tea party support," Green said. "If those lawmakers remain committed to the tea party agenda and willing to buck their own leaders if need be, they may well exercise considerable influence on the legislative agenda."

The debt ceiling and sequestration. Immigration reform. Tax reform. Gun control. All are at the top of Washington's agenda. In addition, at some point in the next four years, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is expected to step down from the court, guaranteeing a fight over a new nomination. And if one of the current members of the court's conservative majority were to retire, the fight to replace that justice could be a bloodbath. Nor can anyone foresee exactly what foreign policy crises will crowd the political agenda. Only one thing is certain: Washington will not be dull in 2013.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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