Bipartisan Policy Center

Optimizing the U.S. Congressional Calendar to Boost Legislative Productivity

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For decades, the standard rhythm for members of the House of Representatives has been to fly into Washington on Monday evening and depart on Thursday afternoon, causing legislative and oversight work to be jammed into just three days. Sometimes the work week gets even shorter when *political dynamics* [https://thehill.com/homene ws/house/4790180-gop-funding-house-recess/] cause floor votes to be canceled. The result is members of Congress end up overbooked when they are in Washington and spend more time traveling than in session.

Many members of Congress recognize this problem, and over the past few years have proposed alterations to make the congressional calendar more effective and efficient. Proposals come in numerous varieties. Some propose a two weeks on, two weeks off rotation. Others call for a five-day work week at varying intervals.

As we have *previously* [https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/for-congress-better-results-sta rt-with-a-better-schedule/], BPC proposes an alternative calendar for the coming year that: 1) reduces member travel time while also increasing the time available for legislative work in Washington; 2) maintains the traditional August recess; and 3)
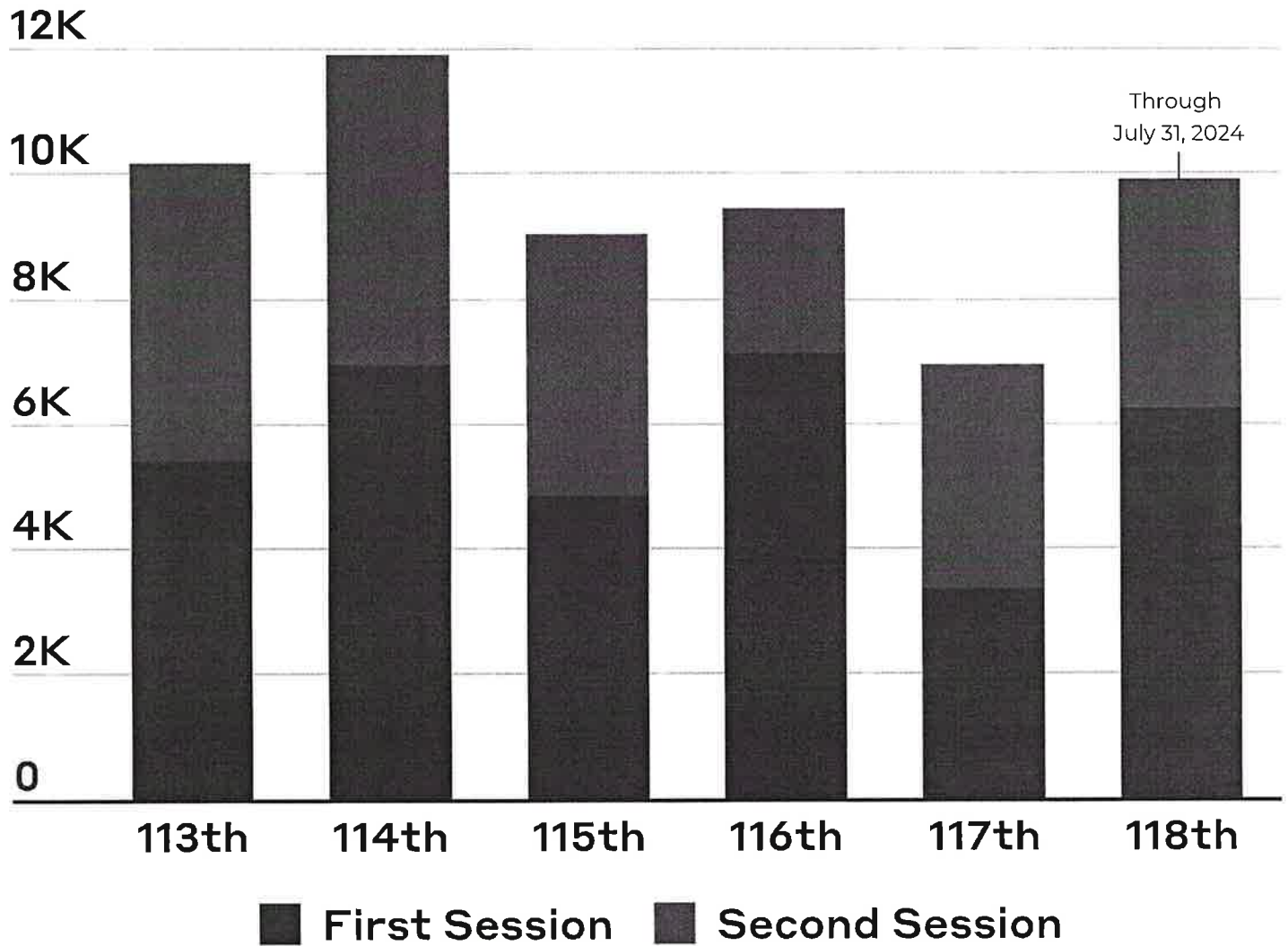
provides ample time in district for constituent work and campaign activities. Our proposed 2025 House calendar provides for 20 additional full session days and 18 fewer travel days as compared to the official 2023 House calendar which is the most recent non-election year comparison.

Fixing the overall calendar to provide more legislative and district work days with fewer travel days would be an important step in the right direction. However, it is equally important to consider Congress's internal schedule when it is in Washington. As the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress *identified* [https://www.govinfo.go v/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-116hrpt562/pdf/GPO-CRPT-116hrpt562.pdf], a chief concern is the number of committee meeting conflicts that members face. Often double- or triple-booked, members are forced to "ping pong" from hearing to hearing which limits their ability to participate fully in committee business.

The House has taken numerous steps to address committee conflicts. At the start of the 118th Congress, at the direction of chamber leaders, the House Digital Service (HDS) developed its *Deconflict* [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/house-digital-service_this-m onth-the-house-digital-service-at-activity-7052695348552593409-h16p?utm_source=sh are&utm_medium=member_desktop] tool for committee schedulers to see when their members had meeting conflicts to make scheduling around them easier. More recently, HDS has begun rolling out a new platform, *HouseCal* [https://library.bussola-tech.co/p/ housecal-legislative-scheduling], to expand on that deconfliction tool by incorporating additional demands on member time and other expanded functionality.

While improving technology is essential for Congress to progress on this issue, alone it is not enough. As the figure below shows, the number of committee scheduling conflicts increased from the 117th to the 118th Congress.

Scheduling Conflicts By Congress and Session

Note: Scheduling conflicts are defined as any instance of overlap within a member's committee schedule. If a member was expected to be at more than two hearings at the same time, each conflict is counted separately. While hearing start time is often posted publicly, end time is not. We assume that all hearings last two hours for the purposes of this analysis. Scheduling conflicts for the 118th Congress are presented through July 31, 2024.

Efforts to boost congressional capacity often focus on *strengthening congressional committees* [https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/reforms-to-empower-house-committees/]. Encouraging more

robust and expansive committee operations likely means members will need to spend more time in committee, making the need to solve this problem even more pressing.

We recommend the following, in addition to the calendar above, to reduce the number of committee meeting conflicts and provide the institution with the most effective and efficient schedule possible.

1) The House should adopt block scheduling for committees. As *previously shown* [https://bipart isanpolicy.org/blog/a-simple-fix-to-congress-calendaring-catastrophe/], an optimized block schedule can be achieved using members' existing committee assignments and can be updated each Congress to minimize the risk of conflict and reflect the needs of the institution. Below we

present the optimized block schedule for the 118th Congress. If this system were presently in place, it would have reduced the potential for conflicts during the 118th Congress by 85%.

Block A	Block B	Block C
Committee on Agriculture	Committee on Ethics	Committee on Appropriations
Committee on the Budget	Committee on Foreign Affairs	Committee on Armed Services
Committee on Education and the Workforce	Committee on House Administration	Committee on Energy and Commerce
Committee on Homeland Security	Committee on Oversight and Accountability	Committee on Financial Services
Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government	Committee on Rules	Committee on the Judiciary
Committee on Natural Resources	Committee on Science, Space, and Technology	Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic	Committee on Small Business	Committee on Ways and Means
Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence	Committee on Veterans' Affairs	
	Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party	

Note: Scheduling blocks were determined using data on the overlap in committee membership and the number of hearings held per committee to create a proxy for the risk of conflicts. We used a Generalized Reduced Gradient nonlinear model to identify the distribution of committees between blocks that minimized the potential for conflicts. The algorithm relies on existing meeting data, so it excludes committees that did not meet during the 118th Congress.

2) Following Modernization Committee *Recommendation #196* [https://bipartisanpolicy.org/modernizing-congress/], House rules should be amended to require committees to enter their meeting data into the *Deconflict* platform to further reduce meeting conflicts within their optimized block. Presently, each committee uses the *Deconflict* tool on a voluntary basis. Some

committees have been diligent about using the tool and trying to reduce scheduling conflicts for their members. However, scheduling problems will persist and the tool will never achieve its full potential unless every committee is required to participate in the deconfliction process.

To reach its full potential, Congress must adopt schedule and calendar changes that provide more time for members to meet with their constituents in district and more time in Washington to engage in legislative and oversight business. The good news is that this can be achieved with simple calendar changes that reduce the number of travel days and procedural changes that optimize members' time while they are in Washington.

Appendix

The code used to create the dataset for this analysis is available in a *GitHub repository* [https://github.com/rachelorey/Scheduling-Conflicts-in-Congress/]. The methodology involves scraping hearing data from docs.house.gov and committee assignments from clerk.house.gov, identifying scheduling conflicts by cross-referencing these datasets, and analyzing the conflicts to identify trends. This approach quantifies how often and where scheduling conflicts occur within House members' committee hearing schedules. For detailed information and updates, please refer to the repository.

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