

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Pushes Priorities in Congress

Immigration, Tax Breaks Are Among Items on Business Group's Agenda



U.S. Chamber of Commerce CEO Tom Donohue wants lawmakers to move beyond intraparty skirmishes and partisan bickering that paralyzed the last Congress

By
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WASHINGTON—The U.S. Chamber of Commerce flexed its muscle in the midterm election, winning 14 of 15 Republican primaries in which it was

involved and helping the GOP recapture the Senate. Now it wants the Republican majority in Congress to get to work.

Chamber Chief Executive Tom Donohue said in an interview that the GOP has two years to enact “a vigorous program aimed at meeting the needs of the American people” or risk losing their majority. The Chamber wants Congress to act on business priorities such as an immigration overhaul, transportation funding, tax breaks and trade agreements.

Mr. Donohue warned lawmakers to move beyond intraparty skirmishes and partisan bickering that paralyzed the last Congress, hinting that his group might look to oust lawmakers who try to derail the legislative process.

The Chamber played a central role in the midterm campaigns, spending more than \$70 million, according to an official. After backing a number of losing candidates in 2012, the goal for the group—and the Republican party—in 2014 was to nominate candidates with the best prospects of winning a general election, and an aptitude to govern once they arrived in Washington.

“We had candidates who were fundamentally more interested in turning over the apple cart than they were in governing,” Mr. Donohue said of the congressional elections in 2010 and 2012.

Of 268 candidates the Chamber endorsed in the 2014 election, 249 won, including 22 in the 30 most contested races in which the group was involved. In the eyes of Mr. Donohue and other

Chamber officials, the results sent a clear message: “People want Congress and the Senate to govern,” Mr. Donohue said. “They want them to be competent.”

Polls support that view. Public-opinion surveys taken before and after the election showed a much higher share of the electorate wanted to see lawmakers compromise than in 2010, when the tea-party wave swept Republicans to power in the House.

Over the last two years, the Chamber’s efforts to elect GOP candidates haven’t always translated to clout in Congress. Immigration changes, a top Chamber priority, hit a conservative roadblock in the House.

Republican resistance also complicated passage for other top business priorities, including transportation funding, tax breaks for selected industries and the reauthorization of the U.S. Export-Import Bank. Extension of an insurance backstop for major terrorist attacks also failed to clear the Senate in the final days of Congress.

In 2015, Congress faces many of the same issues, as well as another potential round of budget brinkmanship when lawmakers will next need to raise the country’s borrowing limit and fund the government for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1.

The Chamber additionally wants approval of new trade agreements and legislation to expand domestic energy production. It would also like to change parts of the 2010 health law, including a repeal of the tax on medical-device sales, and the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial law.

Mr. Donohue wants Republicans to act on immigration despite the political furor created when President [Barack Obama](#) in November eased deportation rules for millions of illegal immigrants already in the country.

“There’s one thing they could do right now, and quickly—pass a bill,” Mr. Donohue said, referring to the Republican outcry over Mr. Obama’s executive actions. “You’re the dog that caught the truck. Now, figure out what to do with it.”

The Chamber head thinks the 2016 presidential race offers both parties further incentive to change the current system. “Would you want to run for president in either party if you were opposing an immigration bill?” he asked.

Mr. Donohue said the biggest impediment to productivity in the next Congress is the continued disappearance of conservative Democrats and centrist Republicans willing to work across the aisle. “The middle has all gone away,” he said.

The Chamber, of course, played a role in that disappearance by targeting conservative Senate Democrats to help the GOP reclaim a majority. The group backed only six Democrats in the last election, none in the Senate.

Polarization in both parties has made it harder for the Chamber to work with Democrats, Mr. Donohue said, because there are few conservative or centrist Democrats who share the group’s policy priorities. “I want to be in a position to support some of the Democrats we used to support before,” Mr. Donohue said.

Despite the polarization, Bruce Josten, the Chamber’s head of government affairs, sees more room to compromise over the next two years because expanded Republican majorities and an “enlarged moderate GOP wing” will make it easier for congressional leaders to negotiate with the president. “There are more opportunities to cobble votes together,” he said.

Mr. Josten also noted that Mr. Obama, House Speaker [John Boehner](#) (R., Ohio) and incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) all share the need to pass legacy items. “None of them can succeed without each other,” he said.

Mr. Donohue has run the organization since 1997, building it into one of the most powerful trade groups in Washington. The group represents more than three million businesses, big and small, and has become a major conduit for their political spending.

As the 75-year-old Mr. Donohue nears the end of his second decade presiding over the Chamber, he said he doesn’t plan to wind things down—“If I did, I wouldn’t say,” he added. He said a top executive who recently announced his own decision to step aside told Mr. Donohue “the next day, nobody listened to him anymore.”

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