

By Nicole Gaudiano, Gannett Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON – As Congress faces record-low approval ratings, open-government groups say more transparency could help rebuild public trust. But greater disclosure may be a tough goal when it comes to legislation targeting lawmakers' activities.

Lawmakers scrambled recently to advance the STOCK Act, requiring more public disclosure of their own transactions following a 60 Minutes broadcast suggesting members of Congress may have benefited financially based on nonpublic information they obtained as part of their jobs.

But groups involved in Sunshine Week, which begins March 11 and promotes open government and freedom of information, say measures that would improve access to information about members of Congress, lobbyists and public records have stalled or haven't gotten much traction.

"It hits them where they live," said Daniel Schuman, the Sunlight Foundation's policy counsel and director of the Advisory Committee on Transparency, which advises policymakers on transparency issues. "When you have a Congress where it doesn't take many people to stop something and you have heightened sensitivity (to scrutiny), it becomes disproportionately harder to make progress."

One example is the Senate Campaign Disclosure Parity Act, which would require Senate candidates to file campaign finance reports electronically, the same as House candidates, rather than on paper. It now can take weeks before the public can see a Senate candidate's contributions online.

The bipartisan bill didn't get a vote when it was introduced as an amendment to the STOCK Act, though its sponsors expect the Senate rules committee to take it up soon.

"It's quite ridiculous that senators are still filing in paper, and it costs taxpayers money," said

Angela Canterbury at the Project on Government Oversight. "I think they're advantaged by having their campaign finances kept secret longer."

Another measure, the Transparency in Government Act, offers a menu of ideas supported by open-government groups, including more detailed, online disclosure of members' personal financial information, electronic filing of members' foreign travel and gift reports, and a requirement that lobbyists disclose the names of lawmakers and executive-branch members with whom they meet.

Rep. Mike Quigley, D-Ill., who sponsored the bill in the last two Congresses, is the founder of the Congressional Transparency Caucus, a bipartisan group with 22 other members. Yet he has only one Democratic cosponsor for the bill. He broke off the lobbying piece into a separate bill, but that too only has one Democratic cosponsor.

"I don't know why more people aren't interested in jumping in on those measures," Quigley said. "For some, it's just not a high priority. What I would tell those folks is, 'It's hard to lead without the public's trust.'"

Transparency advocates acknowledge some advances in legislative data disclosures. The House began reporting office expenses online in 2009, and the Senate began doing the same last year.

This year, the Republican House launched <http://docs.house.gov>, providing access to legislation up for floor consideration, conference reports and real-time information on floor proceedings. Committee documents will soon be published there as well, said Matt Lira, digital director for House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va.

"It's integral to the process itself," Lira said. "If it doesn't go up on docs.house.gov, it doesn't meet the requirements for floor consideration."

But some say it may take a scandal or publicity to trigger broad legislative reform. Former lobbyist Jack Abramoff's illegal activities led to passage of a lobbying and ethics bill in 2007,

and the 60 Minutes broadcast helped provide the momentum behind the STOCK Act, Canterbury said.

"It often takes a crisis or a controversy to get real reform," she said.

The House and Senate have passed versions of the STOCK Act, which would clarify that lawmakers, just like other citizens, can't use insider knowledge for financial benefit. The bills would also require more timely disclosures of their transactions.

Transparency groups say the House version is weaker than the Senate version, and omits two key Senate-passed provisions. One would require people who earn a living gathering political intelligence to register as lobbyists. The other would clarify federal law to help prosecutors target public corruption.

"Right now, it doesn't really appeal to me because it looks like more of a fig leaf than a real bill," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who sponsored the anti-corruption amendment.

But Cantor's spokeswoman, Laena Fallon, said the provisions raise constitutional questions. She said the political intelligence provision is "extremely broad" and could have unintended consequences for everyone from local Rotary club participants to national media conglomerates.

The Senate may opt to pass the House version of the bill, but public watchdog groups say it would be better to let a House-Senate conference committee resolve differences between the two versions.

"This should be bipartisan legislation that everybody should get behind," said Anne Weismann, chief counsel for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. "The fact that we're having difficulty passing anything except the most watered-down bill is really symptomatic of how broken Congress is."