

Congress seems to be unable to come up with funding for an effort to combat the zika virus. Instead, congressional leaders [told](#) the government to use existing funding, so it has been forced to divert hundreds of millions of dollars from fighting ebola. (You remember that Congress was completely frenzied about the risk of ebola in 2014-15. But Ebola is so last year.) There are efforts to forge a compromise, but no one knows if they will succeed.

Part of what's going on is just what is now considered the normal partisan gridlock, though in a context where it seems even crazier than usual. The Senate is currently ready to vote on three alternatives, but the ones that seem to have the best chances of passing provide only half the funding that the government says it needs, and one of those is tied to a poison pill relating to Obamacare, which the White House probably won't accept. Even if Congress does eventually pass something, the delay has been damaging, since we will lose valuable time for research and preparation.

This bungling of the Zika issue seems to fit a pattern of neglect for public health. Consider the following other recent events:

1. A recent [report](#) by state investigators that the Flint water crisis was due to “budget cuts, decisions by state-appointed emergency manager who prized frugality over public safety, and staff members in the governor’s office who adopted a “whack a mole” attitude to beat away persistent reports of problems.”
2. The presumptive presidential nominee of the Republican Party has embraced a discredited theory that vaccines cause autism, including a tweet that says “I am being proven right about massive vaccinations—the doctors lied. Save our children & their future.”
3. The House leadership is pushing a [bill](#) to delay new air quality standards for ozone until 2025. According to EPA, the standards will prevent 300-700 deaths and 230,000 asthma attacks in children every year.
4. Speaking of the Republican nominee, he’s also said that climate science is a hoax and that he would close EPA entirely, as well as denouncing regulations that ban chemicals destroying the ozone layer from hairspray and other products.

There seems to be a bit a pattern here. One part of it is skepticism toward science, which seems to be rampant in some parts of the GOP. A lot has been said about that by others, so I won't go into it here. The other part, I think, is an uneasiness with the whole concept of *public* health.

The term “public health” implies that we are not, after all, entirely in charge of our own individual destinies. The idea that there are some problems that are shared by everyone,

and some risks that have to be dealt with collectively, sits poorly with the Ayn Randian individualism so popular on the Right. And of course, to admit that the government can do anything important well is distasteful to the Grover Norquists of the world — recall that Norquist, a revered figure on the Right, is the one who said that he wanted to shrink government enough that he could drown it in the bathtub. I guess he wasn't thinking about the fact that, without the government, his bathtub water would be crawling with bacteria.

When you put together an unwillingness to believe in science and a distrust in the ability of government to do anything at all, protection of public health gets to be a lot harder. Let's hope that Congress is able to overcome these obstacles and do something about the Zika threat before it's too late.