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Gridlock is good, helps the economy

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Once again, we must rise in defense of doing nothing - for Congress, that is. The Washington Post's Phillip Bump has praised the 114th Congress for doing more than the 113th Congress did, and far more than the 112th.

"The 112th Congress, you might remember, was the least productive in modern times," he writes. "After the first year of this 114th Congress, more bills have been enacted than in the 112th or 113th, according to data compiled by GovTrack.us. So far, the 114th is tracking more closely with the more-productive 110th and 111th."

How is that a good thing, though?

As David Boaz of the Cato Institute points out, "Bump's article is full of charts and data, all organized around the theme that a good, 'productive' Congress is one that produces bills."

Is that so? Many Washington-watchers believe it, Boaz notes. But not everyone.

"Many of us think that passing more laws - that is more mandates, bans, regulations, taxes, subsidies, boondoggles, transfer programs, and proclamations - is a bad thing," he writes. "In fact, given that the American people pondered the 'least productive Congress ever' twice (with elections in 2012 and 2014), and twice kept the government divided between the two parties, it just might be that most Americans are fine with a Congress that passes fewer laws."

The fact is, gridlock is good.

Just last year, The Federalist magazine's David Harsanyi claimed that gridlock had saved the economy.

"The Obama Boom is finally here," he wrote in January. "Gross domestic product grew by a healthy 5 percent in the third quarter, the strongest growth we've seen since 2003. Consumer spending looks like it's going to be strong in 2015, unemployment numbers have looked good, buying power is up and the stock market closed at 18,000 for the first time ever. All good things. So what happened?"

The answer might not be what President Obama thinks, or what Democrats will claim during the presidential campaign.

“Which policy did Barack Obama enact that initiated this astonishing turnaround?” Harsanyi asked. “We should definitely replicate it. Because those who’ve been paying attention these past few years may have noticed that the predominant agenda of Washington was doing nothing. It was only when the tinkering and superfluous stimulus spending wound down that fortunes began to turn around.”

The economy today is in much the same shape - a robust stock market and steady home sales - with a few negative indicators, such as declining oil prices.

Yet one of the most hopeful signs for the New Year is something that Congress undid in recent weeks. It lifted the outdated, counterproductive and unpopular oil export ban. That doesn’t really count as Congress doing something; it was correction a mistake made by a former, more activist Congress.

The real point here is that judging a Congress by its activity is using the wrong measure.

“Government involves force, and I would argue that less force in human relationships is a good thing,” Boaz writes. “Indeed I would argue that a society that uses less force is a more civilized society.”