



# Congress fails to pass major agenda items or budget in 'God-awful' session

By [SEAN LENGELL](#)

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There has been no shortage of energy on Capitol Hill this year, as extreme partisanship has fueled bitter and protracted battles that have kept lawmakers constantly in the news. But despite the noise, Congress has failed to advance many of its core agenda items, including the most basic of duties — passing longterm spending bills to [keep the government running](#).

And while a handful of work days remain on this year's calendar, few signs suggest a flurry of legislative activity for the rest of 2013, leading critics to accuse the first session of the 113th Congress as being among the worst in modern history.

"It's been a God-awful year [on Capitol Hill] in almost every respect you could imagine," said Thomas Mann of the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution. "Congress doesn't know what regular order is anymore, it doesn't engage in the kind of deliberation, lawmaking, negotiation, compromise that is its hallmark."

Failure to pass any of the 12 annual appropriations bills when the fiscal year started Oct. 1 — or even a stopgap "continuing resolution" to keep government funding at last year's levels — led to a 16-day partial government shutdown.

Congress also failed to pass — for the second year in a row — a farm bill that would set federal agricultural policies for the next five years, historically one of the most bipartisan legislative endeavors on Capitol Hill. And it punted on such high-profile issues as revamping the nation's immigration policies and raising the debt ceiling.

If the current legislative pace continues through the year's end, this year's Congress would have produced the fewest number of laws in decades. And most of the legislation it did pass involved relatively minor, noncontroversial matters.

Through early December, 56 laws had been passed, far below the 148 laws Congress created in 2012 — a presidential election year when legislative activity typically is light. In 2011, when

Republicans regained control of the House after four years of [Democratic dominance](#), 90 bills were signed into law.

The slow legislative pace has been blamed partially on a politically divided Congress, where Republicans currently control the House and Democrats run the Senate. But in the past, divided Congresses have produced hundreds of laws in a year, including 424 laws in 1986 and 408 in 1984.

"Divided government doesn't work anymore," Mann said. "Now it's a tool for obstruction rather than incentive for negotiations."

Yet with so much legislative work unfinished, the Senate took a two-week Thanksgiving break — a week more than the House — meaning the upper chamber likely will punt several issues into the new year.

Congress is showing up for work at a pace comparable with last year — an election year when lawmakers take more time off to campaign. Through October, the latest figures available from the official Congressional Record, the [Senate](#) worked 912 hours (the equivalent of 114 eight-hour days) while the House logged 670 hours (84 eight-hour days). For all of last year, the Senate worked 930 hours, while the House spent 725 hours in session.

Both chambers are expected to be in session for only two weeks in December after the Senate worked 13 days and the [House](#) logged nine days in November, meaning lawmakers are on pace to work several weeks less than in 2011, when the Senate was in session for 170 days and 1,102 hours and the House worked 175 days and 993 hours.

Still, not everyone condemns Congress' "do nothing" approach.

"I don't think the American people are interested in hundreds of bill signings if the bills signed into law don't do good," said Dan Holler of the conservative Heritage Action for America. "The idea that bills aren't being signed into law at a rapid pace in-and-of-itself isn't a bad thing."

Michael Tanner of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute said Americans would be better off if Congress passed even fewer laws.

"I guess somebody could dig a hole and fill it in all day [but] would you call them productive?" he said. "If Congress were to pack up and go home, would we really be worse off?"