



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on November 29, 2010

Congress' December To-do List

With one month left until the end of the year, Congress has quite a bit with which to contend. Ranging from the unemployed, "wealthy," and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," to illegal immigration, lame-duck lawmakers intend to make difficult decisions in the ensuing weeks.

The *Associated Press* writes, "Lawmakers, after taking Thanksgiving week off, arrive in town Monday along with the Capitol Christmas tree for the final stretch of the postelection session. Facing a daunting agenda, they could have that tree in their sights well into Christmas week."



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Part of that "daunting agenda" are the [Bush tax cuts](#) enacted in 2001 and 2003, which are set to expire at the end of the year. At issue is whether the tax cuts should be extended for all Americans, or only those making less than \$250,000 annually. Democrats contend that those making above \$250,000 are "wealthy," and can afford to pay more money in taxes, while Republicans assert that those making more than \$250,000 are job creators. Some Democrats have sided with the Republicans on the issue, including Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska. Other Democrats have indicated that they would consider raising the threshold from \$250,000 to perhaps \$1 million.

Likewise, Democrats insist that extending the tax cuts would add billions more to the deficit, simply because the Dems are unwilling to cut spending. However, as noted by economists such as Thomas Sowell, cutting taxes often results in increased tax revenues, as decreased taxes tend to widen the bloc of taxpayers.

The *Associated Press* notes that if lawmakers allow the tax cuts to expire, it would mean "big tax increases for people at every income level," as "the cuts apply to rates on wage income as well as to dividends and capital gains."

Attempting to apply a bipartisan solution to the issue of the tax cuts, President Obama has scheduled a meeting at the White House on Tuesday with Republican leaders to discuss potential compromises. One such compromise would be to allow a temporary extension of tax cuts for the wealthy.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid recommends holding two separate votes, one on the Democrats' plan to extend the tax cuts for the middle class, and the other on the Republicans' proposal to extend the tax cuts for all Americans. More than likely, both proposals will fail, forcing bipartisan negotiations.

In addition to the Bush tax cuts, the *AP* writes, "Congress also has a Dec. 3 deadline to pass a temporary spending bill to avoid a government shutdown. The Senate hasn't passed a single spending bill for the budget year that began Oct. 1. Democrats are working on a catchall \$1.1 trillion to fund the government's day to day operations. Republicans, fresh off their election victory, are unlikely to go along."



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Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell explains the Republicans' stance, "If this election showed us anything, it's that Americans don't want Congress passing massive trillion-dollar bills that have been thrown together behind closed doors."

According to the *AP*, "One idea is to fund the government at current levels through February, when the next Congress and its influx of anti-spending conservatives, will deal with the matter."

If that were to happen, another debate would result: whether the Republicans will oppose raising the [debt ceiling](#) further. Newly elected Republicans such as Rand Paul of Kentucky and Michael Lee of Utah have already articulated their opposition to raising the debt ceiling — though of course the Congress that is now legislating is the lame-duck Congress that does not have the newly elected legislators.

Economists note that a failure to increase the debt ceiling would result in "a global shutdown." However, fiscal conservatives like Glenn Beck assert that the end result would be positive as it would likely force a "national conversation about our real priorities and how they should be funded."

Another issue to be debated in the month of December is the extension of unemployment benefits for two million Americans whose benefits will expire during the holiday season. Republicans continue to object to the extensions, demanding that the Democrats find a way to pay for them without adding to the deficit. The House of Representatives attempted to address this issue prior to Thanksgiving break but failed.

The Senate failed to decide on a 23 percent cut in Medicare payment to doctors, which was set to begin on December 1. The vote has been postponed for another month.

A top priority for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is the [DREAM Act](#), a piece of legislation that would provide amnesty to illegal aliens that enlist in the army or enroll in college.

Additionally, the Senate is set to vote on a measure that would provide greater authority to the Food and Drug Administration to recall and inspect food. Likewise, the House is expected to take up a child nutrition bill already passed by the Senate, which would force healthier school lunches.

Also up for a vote in the final month of the 111th session of Congress is the military [defense authorization bill](#) that has been made controversial by the addition items like the DREAM Act and a measure that would repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

Obama is pushing for Senate to hold a ratification vote on the START treaty stipulating the reduction of nuclear weapon arsenals in the United States and Russia. Republican Senator Jon Kyl asserts that the vote will be pushed into the next Congress, which will likely hinder the treaty's ratification.

Another notable item to be discussed is a change to airport screening methods. The *AP* writes that House Republicans will "continue to develop the rules under which they will govern when they become the majority in January."

Finally, the bipartisan deficit commission will report to the President on December 1 a variety of recommendations to reduce the deficit, including cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and defense.

Whether any progress will be made in the final month of 2010 remains to be seen, but with the presence of more fiscal conservatives in the 112th Congress, perhaps postponing some of the larger issues for the next session would be beneficial.



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