

insights

Congressional Calendar

The schedule that sets when Congress is in and out of session.

Under Pressure

The congressional calendar, like most business on Capitol Hill, is full of technicalities and shaped by Congress's history. The congressional schedule from the Republic's [early decades](#) looks very different from the one Congress follows today.

The House and Senate used to be in session for at least six days a week because travel to and from Washington was lengthy, and members could not simply fly back to their districts on the weekends. The Senate would begin its session in December and adjourn in the spring when the heat became unbearable in Washington. This is how the annual "[August Recess](#)" came to be.

The advent of air conditioning in the middle of the 20th Century removed the underlying need for this break. But the exhausting, year-long sessions that followed ultimately became untenable for members. After working without breaks for the entirety of 1963, senators came together to demand an official August recess, which was later [mandated](#) in 1970.

So No One Told You Life Was Gonna Be This Way

Today, Congress typically meets three to four days per week, allowing members to spend the remaining time in their states or districts. While many members appreciate a schedule that permits them to see their family and constituents, others on Capitol Hill [lament](#) the bygone spirit of bipartisanship and comradery that developed when members spent weeks or months at a time together in the same city, often with their families.

The [House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#) is trying to address this. Committee members have [proposed](#) several solutions, including two full weeks in session followed by two full weeks of district work time. Last year's Committee [report](#) suggested cutting down on travel days, designating specific time for committee work, creating a portal to address now-rampant committee scheduling conflicts, and carving out time for a bipartisan member retreat.

How Do You Measure, A Year in the Life

The congressional calendar is critically important because it determines member schedules and Congress' legislative agenda. For example, the calendar dictates the number of [legislative days](#) in a session, which shapes when legislation can be considered. The calendar also lays out what kind of [session](#) Congress will convene. Democrats will try to use the calendar to their advantage ahead of next year's midterm elections in order to maximize both finalizing their legislative agenda and allowing for ample time for incumbents to campaign back at home.

To keep track of it all, the Thompson Coburn Lobbying and Policy team creates a handy congressional calendar annually with both the House and Senate schedules in one place. Our latest iteration will be coming out soon, so keep an eye out!

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