

# Opinion: The good and bad of Congress in 2011

By Ed Feulner

It's hardly news to say that the American people are fed up with Congress. Public disapproval of the legislative branch is practically as old as the country itself. But lawmakers seemed to reach a new low in 2011.

One Wall Street Journal/NBC poll showed that one out of every three Americans considered the first session of the 112th Congress to "below average." Another 42 percent said it was "one of the worst" in the institution's 222-year history. A poll by CNN, meanwhile, found that only 41 percent think their representative should be re-elected – the first time that figure had dropped below 50 percent.

Is this distrust deserved? Let's review some of the issues Congress handled in 2011.

**We'll start with the positives:**

**1) A Balanced Budget Amendment.** This is the first shot of a long war to limit the size of government while making it virtually impossible to raise taxes to balance the budget.

The Senate recently had the opportunity to vote on a BBA sponsored by Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., one that would exempted Social Security. This despite the fact that fast-growing entitlement spending is playing a huge role in our burgeoning national debt.

Udall's BBA even threw in some class warfare. It would have enshrined the following provision in the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall not pass any bill that provides a net reduction in individual income taxes for those with incomes

over \$1 million.” But it was soundly defeated with votes from both parties.

In the House, a version supported by Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., also crashed and burned. Its major problem: It would have made it easier for Congress to resort to higher taxes to help balance the budget. Or try to balance it, that is: Anyone who knows history can tell you that higher taxes inevitably leads to higher spending.

A stronger, sounder BBA would certainly be a good thing. In the Senate, Utah Republicans Orrin Hatch and Mike Lee did sponsor one that sidestepped the pitfalls of the Udall-Goodlatte approach. (It was voted down as well.) But avoiding a tax-hiking BBA definitely counts as a congressional positive.

**2) Obamacare Repeal.** The president’s signature law may be approaching a day of reckoning in the Supreme Court, but the House already did its part, voting 245 to 189 last January to repeal Obamacare. The vehicle: a bill sponsored by Rep. Eric Cantor, R.-Va., the Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act.

**3) Budget Votes.** President Obama’s budget went down 0-97 in the Senate. The Democratic-controlled chamber, in fact, still hasn’t passed a budget, as required by law, in more than 900 days. But no wonder Obama’s budget tanked: According to Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., his \$3.7 trillion plan would have created \$8.7 trillion in new spending, added \$1.6 trillion in new taxes, and led to \$13 trillion in new debt over the next 10 years.

A far more sensible budget plan by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wisc., meanwhile, drew the support of all but five Senate Republicans. His budget was a good first step to start down the road of comprehensive entitlement reform.

**4) No New Taxes.** Conservative legislators successfully stymied

efforts by President Obama and liberal legislators to raise taxes.

### **On the negative side of the ledger:**

**1) The Supercommittee.** The debt-ceiling fight that raged over the summer led to its creation. Its mission: find \$1.2 trillion in cuts over 10 years. If it didn't succeed, defense was scheduled for massive cuts. Liberals may have failed to raise taxes, but having defense put in the budget cross-hairs like this is an obvious conservative loss.

**2) New Debt.** The Congressional Budget Office counted \$1.3 trillion in new debt last year. Preventing new and higher taxes is key, but it must be accompanied by serious and meaningful budget cuts. The fact that Congress continues to show no stomach for this necessary step offers a big clue as to why public disapproval is so high.

**3) Gridlock.** It can often be a good thing, especially when there are bad ideas to shoot down. But the gridlock in 2011 was often needless. Worse, conservatives always seemed to lose policy battles in the end. It was hardly encouraging, for example, to see the Ryan budget plan abandoned when the time came to pass the annual appropriations bills.

**4) Government Shutdown.** Washington came within minutes of one last April before a compromise was finally worked out. The final deal cut projected increases in spending, but brought no serious reforms to the federal government. Stop-gap measures to avoid making things worse are better than nothing, but conservatives need to start winning the bigger battle.

Will Congress will do better in 2012? That depends on how willing lawmakers are to make difficult decisions.

Take the "cut, cap and balance" plan, which won House approval last July. It's good to see lawmakers stand behind an effort to make substantial spending cuts, pass enforceable budget

caps, and pass a strong BBA. But unless they redouble their efforts to turn these good intentions into reality, lawmakers will stay unpopular back home.

Do they really want to do that, especially in a major election year?

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