

Senate Wraps Up Year by Punting the Most Difficult Issues to 2024

But leaders of both parties cited steady progress on a package tying Ukraine military assistance to tougher border policies and hope for a deal early next month.

By Karoun Demirjian and Carl Hulse
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The Senate quietly closed out its year on Wednesday by punting many of its most difficult issues into 2024. It failed to deliver on aid to Ukraine. It could not agree on a border policy plan. And a government shutdown is on the horizon.

The fizzle at the finish line guarantees that Congress will be ensnarled in policy and fiscal battles as lawmakers fight for control of the House and the Senate in November's elections.

The chief disappointment for leaders of both parties was the failure to agree on delivering more military aid to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia after the assistance got tied up in Republican demands for stringent new border controls.

It was a setback for Democrats, who had hoped that by keeping the Senate in Washington this week, Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York and the majority leader, could force votes on a measure speeding tens of billions to Ukraine and addressing Republicans' push for immigration policy changes. But a breakthrough did not materialize.

Mr. Schumer, in an interview, said he remained hopeful that an agreement would be ready for a quick vote when the Senate returns next month. He cited greater participation in the talks by the Biden administration and a recognition by Republicans that Democrats are willing to make serious concessions to stem the flow across the southern border.

"I think the Republicans have seen that we're serious about the border, and that we're willing to do some things that maybe they thought we wouldn't do," he said.

Mr. Schumer said the major question for Republicans was whether opposition from Donald J. Trump, the G.O.P.'s presidential front-runner, would deter them from striking a deal, even though most Republicans acknowledged that helping Ukraine was the best approach to confronting Russia and avoiding a wider conflict.

"They have the looming specter of Donald Trump, who they know in their hearts has been not just irrational but nasty on this issue, trying to use it to appeal to the worst

political instincts of people,” Mr. Schumer said. He added that Republicans would face a choice between Mr. Trump and the “specter of history looking down on them” should the United States abandon Ukraine.

The lack of resolution came as no surprise to Republicans, some of whom jeered Mr. Schumer for thinking he could outmaneuver them in just a few days’ time on an issue as vital to their base as border security — particularly given that the G.O.P.-led House left town last week for the holiday break.

But Mr. Schumer and Senator Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky and the minority leader, issued a joint statement saying they were “committed to addressing needs at the southern border and to helping allies and partners confront serious threats in Israel, Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific.”

Mr. McConnell also acknowledged Democratic movement on border policy, saying on Wednesday that “there’s no longer any disagreement that the situation at the southern border is unsustainable and requires the Senate to act.”

After a flurry of legislating the previous two years with Congress under Democratic control, [productivity in Congress declined sharply](#) in 2023 under divided government. The Democratic-led Senate was spared the internal power struggles that paralyzed the Republican-led House on multiple occasions, but major legislation was scarce.

“I don’t think the Senate has been nearly as productive as it could have been,” Mr. McConnell told reporters on Tuesday.

Mr. Schumer said Democrats deserved credit for preventing congressional Republicans from overturning their accomplishments of the previous two years and averting fiscal chaos by forcing the G.O.P. into compromise agreements on raising the debt limit and temporarily funding the government.

“We prevented them from doing the worst stuff,” he said.

But Congress only postponed what looms as a messy spending showdown by passing a stopgap bill in mid-November. Almost immediately upon returning next month, the House and the Senate will face two staggered deadlines for funding the government on Jan. 19 and Feb. 2.

With most of the focus on Ukraine, little progress has been made on the annual spending bills and lawmakers of both parties are increasingly sounding the alarm about the dangers of cuts that would occur if no agreement can be reached. But Speaker Mike Johnson, who was installed after the ouster of Kevin McCarthy in October, has indicated that he might be willing to accept the cuts, a prospect that Mr. Schumer warned could spur an election-year backlash.

“We have Senate Democrats, House Democrats and Senate Republicans sort of aligned,” he said. “Johnson will learn that it has to be bipartisan.”

It is unclear if the threat of the back-to-back government shutdown deadlines will infuse talks over the national security package with needed momentum. Lawmakers will have only 10 days once they return to Washington to resolve a series of critical differences, including the most basic question of what size the rest of the government's 2024 fiscal year budget should be. Congress also kicked into next year contentious fights over federal aviation safety policy and the renewal of an antiterrorism surveillance policy.

A sweeping Pentagon policy bill was a rare bright spot for Congress this year. Both the House and the Senate [passed the bill in December](#), despite objections from conservative lawmakers that it omitted a series of measures they had sought to curtail Pentagon programs providing abortion access, transgender health services and diversity training. The legislation's passage maintained Congress's more than 60-year streak of authorizing spending for the military.

The Senate also managed in its waning hours to [overcome a nearly yearlong protest from Senator Tommy Tuberville](#), Republican of Alabama, who had blocked the promotions of hundreds of senior military officials. Mr. Tuberville had demanded that the Pentagon reverse a policy ensuring that service members needing to go long distances to obtain abortions or other forms of reproductive health care would be given time off and have their travel expenses reimbursed.

On Tuesday, Mr. Tuberville allowed the last of the delayed promotions to proceed without, Mr. Schumer said, getting "one bit of what he asked for — only a lot of pain to military families."