Congress sidesteps “Fiscal Cliff” threat

The “fiscal cliff,” a combination of major tax-increases and spending cuts, was averted when Congress agreed to a last minute deal that was signed by President Obama on January 2\textsuperscript{nd}. At times, it appeared that the gap between the deals tendered by President Obama and Speaker of the House John Boehner seemed too far to bridge, but late-night negotiating sessions throughout the holidays ended up producing an acceptable result to both leaders of their parties.

However, the sequestration cuts that were part of the fiscal cliff are still to be debated in the coming year. The agreed upon deal only delayed these cuts for two months meaning that Congress will consider these in conjunction when we reach our borrowing “debt” limit.

The fiscal cliff deal included a 4.2 percent tax increase for Americans making over $400,000 ($450,000 for families) which was a Democratic policy victory. However, not all Democrats were happy about the income amount being set that high. Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) believed that setting the mark that high set a precedence that people making up to $450,000 were in the middle class. He was one of the few Democrats to vote against the bill.

House Republicans were able to get a small victory by protecting estate taxes. While the estate tax rate rises from 35 percent to 40 percent, estates worth as much as $10 million for married couples will go untaxed and the exemption will grow to $15 million by the end of the decade.

With Congress merely delaying spending cuts for two months, another political battle is expected in the coming weeks.

Kerry gets nominated for the Secretary of State position

Massachusetts Senator John Kerry was recently nominated to become the next Secretary of State to replace Hillary Clinton who announced that she will resign. Sen. Kerry has long coveted that spot and brings years of experience from the Senate Foreign Relations committee along with him to the Secretary of State position.

Kerry’s selection is not a surprise seeing as he spent much of his summer helping President Obama with debate preparation. After the election, pundits predicted that Susan Rice, the current United States Ambassador to the United Nations, would get the nomination. However, in the aftermath of the Benghazi tragedy, many Republican Senators voiced their vocal opposition to her and threatened a long battle to prevent her from being confirmed. Rice subsequently withdrew her name from consideration and President Obama announced his support for Sen. Kerry to be his next Secretary of State.

The Senate is expected to approve Sen. Kerry’s nomination without significant opposition. Kerry has served in the body since 1985 and has already garnered the support of influential Republican John McCain.

If and when Kerry is confirmed, there will be a special election to replace him in the Senate. Republicans are hopeful that recently-defeated moderate Scott Brown with run again. The race could be another brutal one, with Congressman Ed Markey throwing his name in for Democrats.

With the 113\textsuperscript{th} Congress being sworn in already, look for the Senate to begin taking up Sen. Kerry’s confirmation hearing in the coming weeks.
Earlier this month, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley announced that Rep. Tim Scott would replace Sen. Jim DeMint following DeMint’s somewhat surprising resignation. Scott will become the first black Republican Senator since U.S. Senate since Edward Brooke (R-Mass.) left his seat. Although Scott has been appointed, he must still run in a special election in 2014.

Tim Scott was elected to the House in 2010 during the major Republican-wave and has been one of the strongest conservative voices in the House since then. When Sen. DeMint announced he would be leaving to take over the Conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation, he allegedly threw his support behind Rep. Scott as his replacement. The Republicans have had an image problem, losing the African American vote 94-6 this year will now have the only African-American Senator. This may help the party in future elections to try to gain support among African-American voters.

Although Scott still must run in a special election in 2014 for the Senate, he should have little trouble in typically conservative South Carolina.

Shuster optimistic about a transportation deal

Bill Shuster (R-PA) was recently appointed Chairman of the House Transportation Committee and he carries high hopes on both sides of the aisle that a bipartisan transportation and infrastructure deal can be completed. Rep. Shuster is expected to be receptive to ideas from both parties while remaining aware of concerns related to taxes and general spending.

Rep. Shuster’s ability to work not only within committee but also with the full Republican House and the Democratic Senate to pass a bipartisan deal will be put to the test this year. During his tenure in Congress, Rep. Shuster has maintained a strong relationship with Senator Boxer, who is the chairman on the Transportation Committee in the Senate. This relationship and Shuster’s relationship with leadership in the House could prove to make the difference in a deal passing this year.

Over the past several years, Congress has been unable to achieve a grand compromise on transportation. Last year, House Republicans and Senate Democrats could not agree on both the length and size of the transportation package. In the end no deal ended up getting passed and Congress was forced to pass another continuing resolution.

The ability to pass a $100 billion-plus bill on infrastructure will prove to be difficult. Without the help of earmarks and a hard-lined Tea Party who prioritizes spending cuts over infrastructure investment will make it difficult for a bill to garner enough votes to pass both chambers of Congress.

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**Washington Insider**

**Senator Daniel Inouye dies**

On December 17, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hi) passed away due to respiratory complications. Sen. Inouye was incredibly well respected during his long tenure in Congress. He was first elected to Congress in 1959, and to the Senate in 1962, as a decorated World War II combat veteran. Inouye was also the first Japanese-American elected to Congress and the second longest serving Senator in history. Sen. Inouye is most notably remembered for orchestrating inquiries into the Watergate scandal and the Iran-contra affair. His funeral was well-attended by many members of Congress and President Obama.

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Special Interest Story Headline

In December, the Supreme Court announced that they to hear a case on California’s Proposition 8, a referendum that limited marriage to a man and a woman. Now that the Supreme Court has decided to hear the case, a ruling will likely come in the late summer of 2013. A ruling on Proposition 8 could have ripple effects on the two Governor’s races in 2013 and the midterm elections in 2014 as well as the future for same-sex marriage in other states.

The Supreme Court has been under significant pressure to take up the issue of same-sex marriage. However, the right to marry is not the only issue that surrounds proposition 8; the other big issue is whether legally married same sex couples have a right to equal benefits under federal law. While California has defined the issues, more states are looking for answers from the Supreme Court.

On Election Day, voters in Maine, Maryland, and Washington all voted and passed amendments to allow same sex marriage in their states while Minnesota defeated an amendment that would have prohibited same-sex marriage by enshrining it in the state’s constitution. The total number of states that allow same sex marriage is now nine.

Their Supreme Court’s decision is expected will have a lasting effect on the nation and will shape politics and policy for years to come.

New Jersey’s 2013 Governor’s race

Chris Christie (R)    Barbara Buono (D)

The New Jersey’s Governor’s race currently appears to be an easier race for incumbent Republican Governor Chris Christie than expected after Newark City Mayor Corey Booker decided not to pursue a gubernatorial run. Instead, pundits predict that he will run for Senate in 2014. The front-runner for the Democrats will be State Sen. Barbara Buono who is currently the only major candidate to declare her candidacy.

Gov. Christie had appeared weakened a few months ago and he saw his approval rating slip in the more Democratic state of New Jersey. However, Gov. Christie’s handling of the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy has helped bolster Christie’s approval and his standing among New Jersey’s citizens and keeping away several top-tier contenders.

State Sen. Barbara Buono is a formidable candidate in herself having served in the legislature since 1994. She apparently is a capable fundraiser has a vast network across the state to draw from. There are three other Democrats who have declared, but Buono remains the most well-known.

Newark Mayor Corey Booker was rumored to be running for Governor, recently put those rumors to rest after holding a press conference to say he has decided not to run. Pundits predict that he will run for 88 year old Democrat Frank Lautenberg’s Senate seat in 2014. He is currently the front runner for the seat, and is believed to be able to beat Lautenberg in a primary.

With the incumbent receiving high remarks from Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike, Gov. Christie is expected to win reelection barring a significant change in his political fortunes.

New Jersey’s Governors Race
1/2–1/6 MoE ± 3.7%
700 registered voters
Fairleigh Dickinson
Buono (D): 21
Christie (R): 64