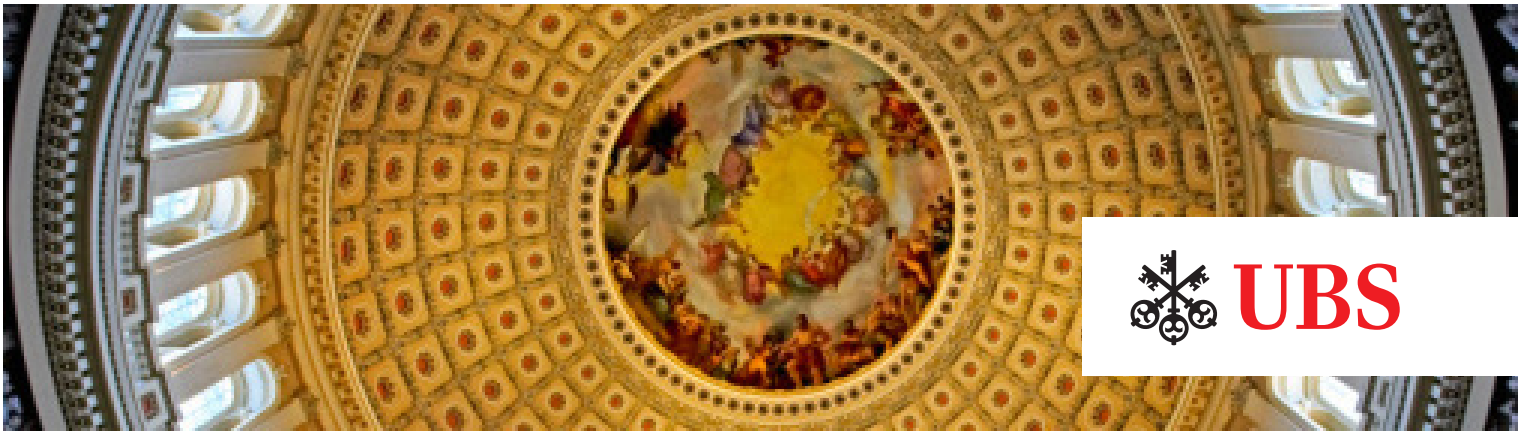
Governmental Affairs US

Washington Weekly

Under the Dome: The Week in Review

11 August 2026



Last Week: The **Senate** confirmed 79 Trump administration nominees, including Todd Blanche to serve as Attorney General (see below), a Russia sanctions package (see below), and a government funding extension through December (see below). The **House** was out of session.

Next Week: The **Senate** will be out of session until the week of September 14. The **House** is scheduled to be out of session until the week of August 31.

The Lead

Senate's Traffic Jam. With the House already out for the August recess, the Senate remained in Washington last week to try and move forward on a very long list of priorities. This can be difficult in the upper chamber, which was designed to have lengthy debates. To move a bill expeditiously in the Senate, there needs to be unanimous support from all senators to waive or limit normal Senate procedure. Without that, a supermajority of 60 senators is needed to invoke cloture and end debate on a bill. *With that in mind, it's not surprising that the Senate had difficulty cramming so much business into one week.*

Funding Slog. One item that the Senate did finish work on was a bipartisan continuing resolution (CR) to extend government funding, which is currently slated to run out at the end of this fiscal year. Over the weekend the Senate advanced the CR extending current funding through December 11. The bill will still need to pass the House when they return at the end of August. The House passed a more stripped-down funding extension last month that did not include many of the deviations in current spending that the Trump administration had requested. *House Republican leadership will now take a temperature check with members and may find frustrations among Republicans and seek changes to gain House approval, which would then require the Senate to take up the bill again in September.*

What the Senate Passed. Besides the funding bill, the Senate completed action on a Russia sanctions bill and confirmation of a large number of nominations (79), including Todd Blanche to serve as Attorney General.

- **Russia Sanctions:** The Senate passed a bipartisan Russia sanctions bill championed by the late Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT). The legislation would target senior Russian leaders and a wide range of entities helping Russia evade existing sanctions. It also would impose up to 100% tariffs on the top five countries purchasing Russian oil. The House has its own competing bill on Russia sanctions that would require new sanctions and export control authorities on Russia and would authorize new spending to arm Ukraine. However, that bill has not gained traction in the Senate or with President Trump. *The Senate's Russia sanctions bill is likely to become law, though it remains to be seen whether the House will prioritize the bill when it gets back in September.*
- **Attorney General Nomination:** The Trump administration was able to get a win with the approval of acting Attorney General Todd Blanche's nomination out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. That proved elusive the previous week when Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Thom Tillis (R-NC) withheld their support. They relented when the Justice Department agreed to make a written commitment to kill a $1.8 billion government weaponization fund and tighten up Trump's audit immunity deal. While this was a critical milestone for Blanche's nomination, other obstacles remained. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) opposed Blanche's nomination and with Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) still absent from the Senate due to illness, Blanche could not afford to lose any other Republican votes. The nomination came down to Senator Bill Cassidy's (R-LA) vote, who ultimately voted for Blanche's confirmation.

The Senate was able to approve Blanche's nomination over the weekend, ending the weekslong back-and-forth with the White House and Senate Republican holdouts.

Other Remaining Business. The Senate left behind a number of unaddressed items. When the Senate returns in September, it has a long list of major items that it did not finish.

- **Crypto Market Structure:** Senate Republicans and the White House had been working to pass a crypto market structure bill (CLARITY Act) before the end of summer. However, the current version of the bill is well short of the bipartisan support needed to overcome a 60-vote procedural hurdle. Many outstanding issues in the bill remain, but the biggest and most contentious concerns relate to the ethics provisions aimed at addressing potential conflicts of interest from the Trump family's and administration officials' crypto ventures. There has long been a thought that there at least would be a vote on the bill in the Senate over the summer, but that vote never came given that some Republicans still have concerns with the legislation. *Summer was a make-or-break time for the crypto bill, and it looks like it is on its last legs for this Congress.*
- **Budget Reconciliation and SAVE Act:** The White House and some Republicans continue to push Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) to take up a House-passed budget resolution that would tee up a $95 billion reconciliation package that includes funding for defense, farm aid, and voting restrictions. However, many Senate Republicans have concerns with the package, and given the lack of votes, Senate Leader Thune has pushed back on its consideration in the Senate. *The likelihood of a third reconciliation package passing before the midterm elections is low but expect the topic to be revived in the lame duck period.*
- **College Sports:** The Senate came close to taking up bipartisan college sports legislation but did not vote on it as lawmakers worked through a crowded agenda. The bill would establish federal standards for name, image, and likeness (NIL) compensation, athlete transfers, and eligibility while providing limited antitrust protections for the NCAA and other college sports governing bodies. It received momentum last week after the SEC and Big Ten, which had previously raised concerns with the legislation, announced support following a series of revisions. President Trump also formally backed the legislation and urged Congress to act before the start of the college football season. *While the recent endorsements have improved the bill's prospects, lawmakers will have a narrow window to reach a final agreement when they return in September.*

Other Issues

Social Security. The clock on Social Security continues to tick closer to the insolvency date that is currently projected for six years from now, 2032. Recently the Senate Finance Committee held a hearing on the insolvency concern and while it did not lead to a breakthrough that would secure Social Security's finances for the next generation, it was notable for at least raising the issue. This hearing had a number of predictable partisan statements that surround Social Security, but it also had bipartisan calls for a commission like the one that led to the 1983 deal that saved Social Security. There was opposition to such a commission, including from AARP. More serious conversations on the issue are beginning. *Progress will be slow over the next six years, but at the end of it Congress will be forced to act or else face voters who get their benefits reduced as a result of inaction*.

Farm Bill Future. The Senate Agriculture Committee was unable to pass a five-year farm bill following a contentious markup. The farm bill authorizes hundreds of billions of dollars for agricultural programs, crop subsidies, nutrition assistance, conservation, and rural development. The previous farm bill expired in 2023, but Congress has kept its programs in place through a series of one-year extensions. The current bill was defeated in committee 10-11, marking a rare break from the bipartisan support the farm bill typically receives. The issues in passing the bill were due to two Republican absences (Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell and Alabama Senator Tommy Tuberville) and Democrats voting against the bill over plans to impose food stamp costs on state governments. Senate Democrats want a two-year delay to a provision in last year's tax law that imposed cost-sharing requirements on states based on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits payment error rates. The House passed its version of the farm bill in April. *The farm bill is expected to be considered in committee again this fall, but another short-term extension of the current farm bill is likely.*

The Final Word

Polling Season. As the summer begins to wrap up and autumn approaches, the political world is about to shift to the general election. This shift will be marked in even more advertising on TV, but also other forms of targeted outreach to voters. In its wake, we will see a flood of polling. The challenge, as always, is separating signal from noise. Many key races will tighten in the coming weeks ahead and the control of Congress will hang in the balance. Polling has become more difficult in recent years, and individual surveys can still miss the mark. Recent midterm elections have generally shown that the industry remains capable of accurately assessing the electorate during a non-presidential year, but there is reason to be wary of reading too much into polls. Rather than focusing on any single headline-grabbing poll, the more important story will be whether consistent trends begin to emerge across states and districts. *Keep in mind that polling is an imperfect tool, but as the campaign enters its final stretch, it is still the best measure available for understanding where the races stand and where they may be headed.*

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