

Thanksgiving: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Thanksgiving is a federal holiday observed on the fourth Thursday in November. It began in 1621 as a harvest celebration between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians and has become a time for families and friends to gather to reflect and to express gratitude.

In 1789, President George Washington declared November 26 a national day of Thanksgiving. Subsequent Presidents issued Thanksgiving proclamations, but the dates of the commemoration changed. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation establishing the last Thursday of November as Thanksgiving.

In October 1941, Congress passed H.J. Res. 41, which declared the last Thursday in November a legal holiday. In December 1941, the resolution was amended to establish the holiday as the fourth Thursday, taking into account years when November has five Thursdays.

This guide is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Thanksgiving. It provides links to sample congressional speeches, presidential proclamations, and cultural and historical resources.

CRS Report

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus

Sample Congressional Speeches

Members of Congress often make floor statements, issue press releases, and enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays. The following are some examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:

- Representative Steve Cohen, “Congressman Cohen Wishes All a Safe Thanksgiving,” press release on Representative Cohen’s website (November 24, 2021)
- Senator Shelley Capito, “Thanksgiving,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record* (November 18, 2020)
- Representative Abigail Spanberger, “Statement Ahead of Thanksgiving Day,” press release on Representative Spanberger’s website (November 27, 2019)
- Senator John Thune, “Thanksgiving,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record* (November 21, 2019)
- Senator Deb Fischer, “Tradition and Gratitude,” column on Senator Fischer’s website (November 19, 2018)
- Representative Nanette Diaz Barragán, “Happy Thanksgiving,” press release on Representative Barragán’s website (November 23, 2017)
- Senator Joe Manchin, “Manchin Wishes West Virginians a Happy Thanksgiving,” press release on Senator Manchin’s website (November 22, 2017)
- Representative Pete Sessions, “Be Thankful: In Honor of the Men and Women and Their Families This Thanksgiving,” Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record* (November 20, 2014)

Presidential Proclamations

One of the uses of a presidential proclamation is to honor a group or call attention to certain issues or events. Proclamations commemorating Thanksgiving include the following:

- Presidential Proclamations—President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-)
- Presidential Proclamations—President Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)
- Presidential Proclamations—President Barack Obama (2009-2017)
- Presidential Proclamations—President George W. Bush (2001-2009)

Earlier presidential proclamations are available through the Government Publishing Office (GPO) website at govinfo.gov.

Thanksgiving Day Resources

Numerous government resources provide information on the history and culture of the holiday. Some of these include the following:

- Thanksgiving, Library of Congress
- Thanksgiving Primary Source Set, Teacher's Guide, Library of Congress
- Thanksgiving Day, Department of State
- Thanksgiving, National Archives News, National Archives and Records Administration
- Congress Establishes Thanksgiving, National Archives and Records Administration, Center for Legislative Archives
- Thanksgiving in North America: From Local Harvests to National Holiday, Smithsonian Institution
- Lincoln and Thanksgiving, National Park Service.

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