WASHINGTON -- To the frustration of many Floridians, Congress has spent relatively few days in session this year and accomplished little while Republicans and Democrats grapple for advantage in the fall elections.

The U.S. House was in session 55 days during the first four months of the year, and the Senate 52 days. That's a slight increase over the same period last year but down by a few days from previous years.

And it's far fewer than the 84 work days logged by most Americans on a Monday-to-Friday schedule, not counting holidays or vacation days. Meanwhile, more than 800,000 Floridians could not find work at all.

More important, although Congress has passed a handful of significant bills this year — notably a JOBS Act designed to make it easier for small businesses to grow by attracting investors — it remains deadlocked on most issues that affect the economy, federal spending and health care.

"We could certainly put Congress up in Washington longer, and we could demand that they do more things," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. "But this particular Congress is pretty closely divided. It's not a question of working harder, it's a question of compromising more."

And partisan politics often stands in the way of compromise, he said. "Hence they spend more time yelling at each other than accomplishing much," Wagner said. "It makes a lot of time in Congress less than useful."

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., hopes to change that. He says he is determined to overcome election-year rancor and pass legislation that most members do agree on, especially to encourage economic growth.

The tea party darling, widely considered a vice presidential prospect, is playing the surprising role of bipartisan broker. Known for sharp attacks on President Barack Obama, Rubio looks like a pragmatist these days, not an attack dog running for vice president.

Rubio teamed last month with fellow Republican U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran of Kansas and a pair of Democrats, Mark Warner of Virginia and Chris Coons of Delaware, to propose a "Startup Act
2.0" that would make it easier for small businesses to sell stock to fund growth. It would also create new visas to allow high-skilled foreign students and entrepreneurs to remain in this country to launch businesses.

Rubio is also drafting a more limited version of the DREAM Act to allow some children of undocumented immigrants to become legal residents — a compromise proposal that Senate Democrats say they welcome to help resolve an issue that has divided the parties.

He and fellow sponsors of the Startup Act hope to reassure the public that Congress can function effectively even in an election year.

"As new guys, we didn't get the memo that we should take election years off," Warner said.

The big question is whether such attempts can actually pass through Congress. The Startup bill has drawn positive feedback but no co-sponsors, nor is there a companion bill in the House, Rubio spokesman Alex Conant said.

"We hope to keep up the momentum, but time is of the essence because of the summer recess and the fall campaign," Conant said. "On the merits, it should pass without trouble. Whether Senate leaders bring it up for a vote remains to be seen."

The inactivity of this session has been especially frustrating to freshman members, such as Rubio and U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, who complained from the start about a congressional calendar full of district work periods and holiday breaks. West, once outspoken on the matter, declined to comment last week.

Meanwhile, some Floridians have learned to adapt by not panicking when vital programs and benefits approach their expiration dates.

For example, when the National Flood Insurance Program was about to expire last week — potentially jeopardizing sales of homes dependent on flood coverage — Florida Realtors and mortgage lenders shrugged. As they expected, the House and Senate passed another 60-day extension to keep the program going until Congress can agree on a five-year revamp.

"The industry is a little smarter now. We've learned to adjust," said Charles Kiesel, a mortgage lender in Cooper City. "You know they will do that: run right up to the deadline, or let it expire and then make it retroactive."

"We've learned how dumb the government can be."