



## It's Time for Congress to Ban Earmarks

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Last month, Republicans won majority control of the House of Representatives after price inflation hit a 40-year high, squeezing family budgets and creating economic uncertainty. An overwhelming majority of voters — 78 percent, according to a pre-election *Politico* poll — listed inflation and the economy as their top motivating concerns.

Republicans now have an opportunity to put an end to the excessive spending that's contributing to rising prices. Banning earmarks should be their first step.

Earmarking contributes to excessive spending and is a distraction from more fundamental governing responsibilities, such as reining in deficit spending and conducting oversight of the executive branch. Instead of throwing earmarked money at their districts, lawmakers should cut unnecessary and wasteful spending and review government programs to ensure that federal funding meets the needs of their constituents.

Supporters of earmarks insist that they are central to Congress's exercising its constitutional power of the purse. But while legislators have jurisdiction to appropriate government funds and the responsibility to oversee how those funds are being used, this doesn't mean that Congress should override statutory formulae or competitive award processes it passed into law to pay favors to influential local groups.

To the degree that Congress leaves too much discretion to the executive to determine federal funding allocations, it should address that issue directly, instead of bypassing administrative processes on a whim.

Looking at the details of where the money flows, it becomes clear that earmarks mostly authorize pork-barrel spending. Instead of focusing on national priorities and ensuring that the federal government meets its core responsibilities to “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity,” as defined by the Preamble of the Constitution, earmarks divert federal spending toward localized projects to curry favors with voters.

Such a misdirected focus inevitably invites fraud, waste, and abuse. Press releases in which legislators herald the earmarks they were able to secure are particularly telling. Earmarks are a valuable currency wielded by politicians looking to get re-elected and secure campaign contributions. They are also a disservice to the public interest.

When Republicans gained a House majority after the 2010 midterms, party leaders banned earmarks, citing examples of corruption and wasteful spending. In 2010, then-House Republican leader John Boehner wrote that earmarks “have become a symbol of a broken Washington, and an entire lobbying industry has been created around them.”

I saw the hordes of lobbyists who lined up outside congressional offices this past September, pushing their agendas with members of the House and Senate. And they’ll be lining up again this December, like squeaky wheels begging for grease from a lame-duck Congress. The earmark ban lasted for an entire decade, before Democrats revived the practice, re-labeling earmarks in 2021 as “congressionally directed spending.” Once the floodgates were open, both parties quickly remembered how valuable earmarks are for personal political gain, and Democrats and Republicans re-engaged in this horse-trading.

The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress included 4,963 earmarks worth a total of \$9.1 billion in fiscal-year (FY) 2022 appropriations bills. From feral-swine management to aquarium subsidies to museum and theater funding to local bike paths, FY2022 earmark spending spanned the gamut of parochial interests. Congressionally directed spending flowed as if taxpayer money were abundant, even as ordinary Americans had to have tough conversations about how to make ends meet. Earmarks show just how out of touch politicians are with the concerns of the constituents they represent.

As inflation continues to eat away at American families’ purchasing power, this outgoing Congress is proposing to spend \$16 billion on earmarks in FY 2023 appropriations bills.

Requested projects include a new \$2.75 million Ohio River Museum in Marietta, Ohio, a city of 13,551 residents; a new fleet of electric buses for the Solano County Transit service based in California, at a cost of \$2 million; a new \$3 million baseball grandstand for the City of Pittsfield, Mass.; and an additional \$2 million for “critical renovations” at Forsyth Library, located on the campus of Fort Hays State University in Kansas — after the library already received a whopping \$17 million for said renovations in FY 2022.

As December 16 — the self-imposed funding deadline for FY 2023 appropriations — approaches, members of the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress will be tempted to shove as many parochial projects into this last funding train as they can. Allowing this lame-duck Congress to load down Americans with excessive spending as inflation continues to eat away at workers’ earnings and savings would be

a mistake. Congress should punt appropriations into next year, so that the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress can begin its tenure with a strong agenda to restore fiscal responsibility, starting with a ban on earmarks.

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