

[Rep. Hal Rogers' pork: red meat for 'tea partiers'](#)

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In the interest of defending the defenseless, I'd like to try to counter the "tea party" backlash against the House GOP leadership's decision to give the Appropriations Committee gavel to longtime Republican appropriator (and "prince of pork") Hal Rogers of Kentucky. Here's a simple budget truth: Earmarks are not causing Washington's fiscal problems.

There are other reasons to dislike earmarks, and I'll get to them later. But critics of Rogers' appointment have tended to focus on pork-barrel projects as epitomes of Washington's out-of-control spending habits. Here's what Tad DeHaven of the libertarian Cato Institute [wrote](#):

The left-wing Think Progress blog recently used a FOIA request to obtain a letter Rogers sent to the Department of Health and Human Services requesting ObamaCare money for a community service center in his district. No earmarks? No problem for Hal Rogers. He can just go the time-honored route of policymakers heckling federal agencies for pork. Earmarks represent just one of many ways that parochial-minded members steer benefits to their districts at the expense of taxpayers and the general public good....

The support for Rogers from House Republican leaders is a slap in the face of voters who demanded change in Washington — change from the big-spending ways of both Democrats and Republicans.

DeHaven doesn't seem to understand his own example.

What Rogers did -- and what the "culture" of appropriators favors -- was push Congress' power over the federal purse strings from the macro level to the micro level. The congressional budget committees set limits on how much the federal government will spend each year (not including "emergency" spending, an often-abused loophole). The appropriators don't decide how big the pie is, they decide how to carve it.

Most of their decisions allocate funding to agencies and programs, leaving the specific uses of money within those programs up to the recipient -- usually the executive branch, but sometimes state or local governments. But in some cases they reduce the recipient's discretion, telling them exactly what to do with the money.

The right way to think about earmarks, then, is as a power struggle on two levels -- among members of Congress, and more broadly between the legislative and executive branches of government. Hey, shouldn't self-styled constitutional conservatives be arguing that Congress should do more of this kind of thing? After all, Article I Section 9 says, "No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law."

But I digress. The obvious problem with earmarks is that they can lead to an arbitrary allocation of resources. West Virginia raked in [more federal dollars per capita than California](#) in part (but just in part) because its senior senator was the most powerful Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The bigger problem with earmarks is that they're a slippery slope that leads to Jack Abramoff and Randy "Duke" Cunningham. When an appropriator engineers funding for, say, a water treatment project in his or her district, it raises questions about why that particular project should be favored. Typically it's because state or local officials lobbied the appropriator to get money for their top priorities. But the funding may also help a campaign donor -- a construction workers' union, perhaps, or a local contractor.

That sleaze factor is the worst aspect of earmarking. Its shadow hangs over practically every kind of pork-barrel project, even ones that lawmakers champion with no motive other than to make their constituents lives' better. Eliminating earmarks would give the people less reason to be cynical, and it probably would help big states like California claim a larger share of the federal pie. But it wouldn't shrink the pie, at least not to any meaningful extent.

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-- Jon Healey