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Conservatives fear 'temporary relief' spending will lock in new government programs forever

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As a multitrillion-dollar emergency coronavirus spending package ground toward passage Tuesday, conservative activists worried that this temporary measure to keep the economy afloat during the pandemic will instead lead to a permanent expansion of the federal government.

“They are throwing \$2 trillion worth of shit at the wall and seeing what sticks,” said FreedomWorks President Adam Brandon. “We are going to be in absolute free fall until you reopen the economy.”

A repeatedly expressed fear was that new benefits will prove difficult to take away once enacted, even after the economy improves, and elevated spending will be difficult to claw back to pre-coronavirus levels once the crisis is averted.

“Conservatives believe economic freedom is essential to limiting the current economic crisis and accommodating a fast recovery following the economic turmoil caused by the coronavirus,” the Club for Growth, a leading conservative group, said in a [statement](#). “And above all, whatever Congress does, it should first and foremost follow the Hippocratic Oath and ‘DO NO HARM.’” The Club is still reviewing the current bill, according to a spokesperson.

Democrats and Republicans have [spurred over the exact contents](#) of the emergency legislation, with each accusing the other of prioritizing pet programs over cash-strapped businesses and workers stuck at home in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus. But President Trump and lawmakers mostly agree on new federal spending to avert a coronavirus-induced economic collapse, with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin playing a significant role in negotiating with Senate Democrats. And Senate Republicans have repeatedly rebuked their Democratic colleagues for blocking a bill.

This has put conservative groups and lawmakers who are supportive of Trump, but critical of excessive spending, in an awkward position. While conservative opposition to the red ink billowing from Washington intensified under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama, much of this infrastructure was created in response to the bipartisan bank bailout signed into law by the previous Republican president, George W. Bush. These groups in turn helped elect members of Congress who promised to be more consistently fiscally conservative, some defeating pro-bailout incumbents in Republican primaries.

Trump harnessed some of this populist energy to win the Republican presidential nomination in 2016 over strenuous objections from the party's governing class. But he did not share their concern for the deficit, which was already set to top the Obama-era figure of \$1 trillion again this year even before coronavirus, defeating more orthodox tea partiers like Sens. Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio in the primaries. Most of the Freedom Caucus, a fiscally conservative bloc in the House, represent the Trump-friendliest districts in the country. Trump's last two White House chiefs of staff, Mick Mulvaney and Mark Meadows, were founding Freedom Caucus members. Meadows, a North Carolina Republican, hasn't yet left his House seat and was involved Tuesday in talks to move the relief package forward.

Most conservatives concede this is a different situation than 2008. Then, banks made questionable decisions and were bailed out by the government. Now, businesses and workers are dealing with a pandemic through no fault of their own and are frequently being closed down at the direction of the government.

"I'm willing to spend more money than I ever thought I'd be willing to spend," said FreedomWorks' Brandon, though he decried Congress's "bazooka approach." He added, "We still don't have the testing. They should be like bubble gum. The tests should be everywhere."

"This crisis will not create a new love affair with big government as the New Deal supposedly did," said Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "For one thing, people can already see the blunders the government has made which have exacerbated the crisis. For example, the federal restrictions on virus testing were a damaging screw-up."