



Trump's Budget Is Basically A Wish List. Here's Why It Matters Anyway.

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The Trump administration will unveil its 2018 budget on Tuesday, likely including big-league cuts to social programs in order to pay for more guns and bombs.

The first thing to know about Trump's budget — or any president's budget — is that most of the proposals it contains stand little chance of becoming law. Instead, the president's budget is a wish list that marks the beginning of a process in which Congress ultimately decides how to set spending levels.

Trump reportedly wants to boost military spending and pay for it with big cuts to safety net programs like Medicaid and food stamps, along with cuts to dozens of smaller items like the Community Development Block Grant.

Republicans are unlikely to go along, since they have struggled mightily to agree on cuts to health insurance subsidies this year. But Bob Greenstein, director of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said the party's love of tax cuts could motivate them to consider all options.

"I would not rule out that these things will be seriously considered and could actually occur," Greenstein told HuffPost.

Congressional Republicans will unveil their own versions of the budget after holding hearings on Trump's budget this week. These documents may be similar to the president's, including massive spending cuts. But even if the House and Senate approve them, nothing immediately happens. Instead, a final budget resolution from the House and Senate will set overall spending levels and then direct various committees to draft legislation to actually enact the cuts.

In 2015, the House and Senate approved budgets with big cuts but didn't force committees to actually carry them out. Congress ultimately continued to fund the government via ad-hoc agreements. After all, President Barack Obama had a veto pen. The fact that Republicans now control the White House is one reason this year could be different, but it's difficult to predict which proposals from the administration's comprehensive outline will be priorities that both Congress and the White House want to pursue.

"There are a lot of budget battles that are fake battles, and there are some budget battles that are real battles," said Chris Edwards, a tax and budget expert with the libertarian Cato Institute. Funding for a Mexican border wall and privatizing air traffic control will likely be top priorities for the Trump administration, Edwards said. But other aspects of the spending blueprint are important, he added, because they create a policy debate.

“The national discussion is really important,” Edwards said. “Major change doesn’t happen without the national discussion.”

Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) said he’s been able to use the budget process to defend the merits of a wide range of government programs in his district.

“It affords me an opportunity to articulate the alternative vision of what we can and should be and hopefully gauge public support for these investments,” Connolly told HuffPost. “It creates a dialectic this country needs to have.”

Republicans have repeatedly used the budget process to push big changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Trump’s proposal reportedly would cut the program’s funding by more than 25 percent, taking benefits away from millions. With nearly 44 million recipients, SNAP is one of the federal government’s biggest antipoverty programs.

An obstacle to following through on Trump’s SNAP cuts, however, is that lawmakers on the House and Senate agriculture committees have already spent years holding hearings on the nutrition program ahead of its next reauthorization in 2018.

“There is a very strong support base for the SNAP program,” Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla.), a former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, told HuffPost. “Whatever’s recommended by the budget committee, even whatever recommendations are made by the administration, ultimately in the next farm bill the House [Agriculture] Committee and the Senate [Agriculture] Committee have to achieve consensus.”

I would not rule out that these things will be seriously considered and could actually occur. Bob Greenstein on potential major cuts in the 2018 budget

The Trump administration may be of mixed mind when it comes to food stamps. The budget is crafted by the Office of Management and Budget, which is headed by Mick Mulvaney, a former member of Congress who was part of the hardcore conservative House Freedom Caucus. The Agriculture Department, which administers SNAP, is overseen by former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, who said last week that he didn’t support big changes to SNAP.

The Trump administration released a “skinny” budget in March; the document coming out on Tuesday will be the fat version, meaning it will have a lot more detail. Republicans in Congress totally ignored the Trump administration’s skinny budget wishes in April when they crafted legislation to fund the government through the end of the current fiscal year. It’s possible they will ignore Trump again when it comes time to avoid a government shutdown this fall.

Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), a key member of the House Appropriations Committee, which is responsible for dealing with funding details after budget bills are approved, said he thinks Congress will want to avoid another budget mess. Democrats and Republicans alike strongly disliked the skinny budget, particularly for its possible impact on National Institutes of Health and Meals on Wheels funding.

“Like I want to go home after having [voted] against Meals on Wheels and say ‘Oh it’s a bad program, keeping seniors alive,’” Simpson said last week, according to Politico.