



## Appropriations bills take a back seat to partisan politics – again

By: Sean Lenggell – August 1, 2013

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As Congress winds down the final work week of its summer schedule, it once again failed to pass any of its 12 annual spending bills before heading home.

Instead, with Capitol Hill calcified by partisan gridlock, lawmakers are expected to once again kick their appropriating responsibilities down the road by passing a temporary funding measure in September that would at least avoid a government shutdown on Oct. 1.

"The appropriations process used to be a time of thoughtful, meaningful discussion about the priorities of this country," said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md., who served more than two decades on the House Appropriations Committee. "It has turned into a messaging body to some degree on the House side. ... That's unfortunate."

A central duty of Congress is to appropriate money to fund various federal agencies and programs, from housing and education to the Pentagon. It's an annual process that is supposed to be handled through 12 major appropriations bills. But as of Thursday, the House had passed only four of those bills. The Senate hasn't approved any.

"I think this may have been the least productive Congress in which I have served -- exceeding the last Congress," Hoyer said.

The problem was highlighted Wednesday, when leaders in the Republican-controlled House pulled the joint Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Bill off the week's agenda, saying they won't take it up again until Congress returns to Washington in September.

The Senate is scheduled to consider its version of the bill Thursday. But Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., is pressing fellow Republicans to reject it after accusing Democrats of breaking a two-year-old agreement on spending caps.

"Voting for appropriations legislation that blatantly violates budget reforms already agreed to by both parties moves our country in the exact wrong direction," McConnell said.

The last time Congress passed all 12 appropriations bills was for the 2006 fiscal year, and even then several stopgap bills, called "continuing resolutions," had to be used to extend the deadline.

And only twice since 2000 have both chambers passed all 12 appropriations bills in time for the start of the fiscal year. Over the past three years, Congress didn't pass any of its individual spending bills.

Critics of piecemeal funding through continuing resolutions complain that since those deals are generally brokered by party leaders -- not the appropriations committees -- the process puts the power of federal purse strings in the hands of just a few people.

"It becomes something you vote up or down on the whole budget rather than sort of picking and choosing bits and pieces of it, and that loss of the legislative process I think hurts to some degree," said Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, a free-market Washington think tank.

"It's much nicer to have the [appropriations committee] hearings and all that rather than have this deal negotiated in a back room somewhere the week before," he said.

Appropriations committee chairmen are as frustrated as anyone, annually pledging to pass their spending bills, only to be thwarted by the weight of partisan divisions.

Government contractors also complain that the uncertainty created by temporary funding measures makes it difficult to budget their own operations. But government watchdog groups and fiscal hawks said the accelerated timetable needed to pass continuing resolutions, compared with the drawn-out appropriations process, makes it more difficult for special interest groups to lobby for earmarks that benefit their industries.

"I don't think the sky falls at all" with continuing resolutions, Tanner said.

Throughout its history, Congress regularly passed and sent to the president all 12 appropriation measures. But with the legislative branch and White House largely split between the two parties over the past two decades, bitter political wrangling has led Congress to routinely fail in its appropriations duties.

Don Ritchie, the Senate's official historian, said massive stopgap bills to fund the federal government is a modern trend without "historical antecedents."

"I'd say it was up until the '90s, that's when the system really began to come apart," he said. "Kicking the can down the road is a relatively recent phenomenon."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, bemoaned the increasing reliance on continuing resolutions but expressed cautious optimism that the traditional appropriations process would return in his lifetime.

"But the bad news is the average senator from South Carolina lives until their 90s," said the 58-year-old lawmaker. "The sooner that day comes the better off this institution and the better off the budget process" will be.