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Conservatives War Over Proposed Earmarks Ban

By MAX FISHER | November 12, 2010 5:15pm



A [debate between Senate Republicans](#) over whether to push for banning all earmarks from legislation is spilling over into a wider argument about the conservative ideology, one taking place in a very public manner between a growing number of GOP officials and conservative pundits. Here's what they're saying and a bit of third-party analysis on what the divide means.

Feuding GOP Congressman

- Rep. Flake: Let's Block All Earmarks** Republican Congressman Jeff Flake from Arizona [writes in the Washington Post](#), "The public revulsion related to earmarks is largely a product of the perceived waste (teapot museums) and the potential for corruption (earmarks exchanged for campaign contributions). These are reason enough for a full [earmark moratorium](#) to be extended to both parties in the House, as well as in the Senate, as is the incongruity of cutting popular programs while doling out money for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame."
- Sen. Inhofe: Complaining About Earmarks is a Distraction** Republican Senator James Inhofe from Oklahoma [writes in National Review](#), "Demagoguing earmarks provides cover for some of the biggest spenders in Congress. Congressional earmarks, for all their infamous notoriety, are not the cause of trillion-dollar federal deficits (of all the discretionary spending that took place in Washington last year, earmarks made up only 1.5 percent). Nor will an earmark moratorium solve the crisis of wasteful Washington spending run amuck. While anti-earmarkers bloviate about the billions spent through earmarks, many of them supported the trillions of dollars in extra spending for bailouts, stimulus, and foreign aid. Talk about specks versus planks!"
- Sen. Coburn: 8 Reasons to Stop Earmarks** Republican Senator Tom Coburn from Oklahoma [lists them in National Review](#). He starts by busting what he says are four "myths": that cutting earmarks won't save money, that earmarks are a small portion of the federal budget, that earmarks reinforce Congressional discretion, and that earmarks are Constitutional. He lists four reasons that earmarks are bad: earmarks are "a major distraction," there was a public debate over earmarks and it "is over," and "earmarking is bad policy."

Feuding Conservative Pundits

- GOP Must Learn Self-Control on Earmarks** National Review's [Stephen Spruiell writes](#), "let's just put it this way: Special inducements and temptations aren't necessary to get a Democrat-controlled Congress signed up for more spending. The lesson of 2001 to 2005 is that earmarks hypnotize Republican majorities into spending like Democrats. Earmarks are *our* problem, not theirs."

- **How Earmarks Ruin Everything** CATO's [Jim Harper writes](#), "The fiscal weaklings—majorities in both parties—decline oversight and go along with spending bills they might otherwise oppose because of goodies for their home states or districts. Earmarker comity may even cause fiscal conservatives to go wobbly. ... Earmarks should go, and Congress should withdraw spending discretion from the executive branch while it reduces spending overall."
- **Earmarks Are Wrong Focus for GOP** Outside the Beltway's [James Joyner sighs](#), "unless eliminating earmarks coincides with a radical reconception of how our government operates, it may be a step in the wrong direction. The Feds spend billions on highways, airports, and other infrastructure projects. Without earmarks, we'd basically have Federal bureaucrats deciding how to spend that money. That may in fact be less wasteful and more efficient. But I don't see how this doesn't constitute a major redistribution of discretionary power away from Congress — who's supposed to decide how Federal funds are allocated — to unelected people not mentioned in the Constitution."

What This Means for GOP and Conservatives

- **Will Tea Party Overturn GOP Establishment?** Politico's [Manu Raju writes](#), "With a vote coming Tuesday on the ban on earmarks, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's opposition was seen as enough to defeat the plan — especially since it was proposed by South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint, who is deeply unpopular with many of his colleagues. But one thing McConnell can't control: the sway of tea party activists, who are beginning to mount an aggressive lobbying push to demand that wobbly Republican senators take a firm line and publicly announce their support for the two-year earmark moratorium."
- **Could Determine GOP's Character** Talking Points Memo's [Evan McMorris-Santoro writes](#), "Total opposition to earmarking is a key tea party tenet, and the battle to get Republicans to voluntarily ban it in their ranks is already raging. Establishment leaders like Minority Leader Mitch McConnell -- who favor earmarking for its time-honored electoral implications -- are clashing with pro-ban Senators led by Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), the body's tea party hero. ... Who wins the scrum could have broad implications in 2012."

Sources

- [Earmarks Myths and Realities](#) *Tom Coburn*, National Review
- [A Phony Issue](#) *James Inhofe*, National Review
- [Earmarks Showdown](#) *Jeff Flake*, The Washington Post
- [Tea Party vs Establishment](#) *Manu Raju*, Politico
- [Follow the Money](#) *James Joyner*, Outside the Beltway

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