

## **Rand Paul says tea party pushed Barack Obama to shift view on earmarks**

In the first-ever meeting of the Senate Tea Party Caucus on Jan. 27, 2011, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., shot a rhetorical barb at President Barack Obama over earmarks.

An earmark is a requirement that money approved by Congress be spent in a specific way at the request of a lawmaker. Critics have long argued that earmarks are likelier to serve the interest of a particular congressional district or constituent group than the national good.

At the Tea Party Caucus meeting, Paul said, "Before we were even sworn in, the Republican caucus got together ... they forswore and said, 'No more earmarks.' Are they going to co-opt us? I went to my first State of the Union the other day, and guess who is now against earmarks? The president of the United States has been co-opted by the tea party!"

We decided to see whether Paul was correct that Obama had changed his stance on earmarks.

First, here's what Obama said during his Jan. 25, 2011, State of the Union address. To the applause of lawmakers, he said, "And because the American people deserve to know that special interests aren't larding up legislation with pet projects, both parties in Congress should know this: If a bill comes to my desk with earmarks inside, I will veto it. I will veto it."

Now let's look at what he said during the 2008 campaign. As a candidate, Obama spoke out several times against earmarks. In fact, our Obameter has been tracking no fewer than three earmark-related promises. They are:

- Through the "Transparency and Integrity in Earmarks Act, will shed light on all earmarks by disclosing the name of the legislator who asked for each earmark, along with a written justification, 72 hours before they can be approved by the full Senate." (We rated this one a Compromise.)
- "And, absolutely, we need earmark reform. And when I'm president, I will go line by line to make sure that we are not spending money unwisely." (We rated this a Compromise.)
- "Barack Obama is committed to returning earmarks to less than \$7.8 billion a year, the level they were at before 1994." (We rated this one Promise Broken.)

As our promise ratings indicate, his record on earmarks as president has been less than consistent.

In March 2009, for instance, Obama said he would sign a \$410 billion omnibus spending bill containing a reported 8,570 earmarks totaling \$7.7 billion. ABC News' Jake Tapper

wrote at the time that Obama seemed a little embarrassed about it, refusing to sign the bill in public or even to release a photograph.

Appropriations bills covering fiscal year 2010 contained 9,499 congressional earmarks worth \$15.9 billion, according to the nonpartisan group Taxpayers for Common Sense.

His inconsistent opposition to earmarks convinces Daniel Mitchell, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, that Paul's observation is accurate.

"Given the huge number of earmarks signed into law by Obama, I think his subsequent back-pedaling is a testimony to the power of the tea party, or at least a testimony to the broader grassroots revolt against big government," Mitchell said. Mitchell added that Paul may be guilty of "a bit of puffery in his rhetoric."

We also asked Steve Ellis, a veteran earmark-watcher for the nonpartisan group Taxpayers for Common Sense, for his interpretation.

"While the president hasn't called for the outright abolishment of earmarks before, he has been for earmark reforms and reductions," Ellis said.

Ellis said that, as a senator, Obama went through an "arc" in his views and actions on earmarks. In his first year, Obama followed the lead of fellow Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin. Durbin sat on the Appropriations Committee, a major institutional source of earmarks, and that year, Obama "got all sorts of earmarks."

The following year, Ellis said, Obama did not pursue earmarks for any for-profit companies, and the year after that, he went further than the rules required and released all of his earmark requests since becoming a senator.

In his final year in the Senate, Obama gave up earmarks entirely. "Of course he was positioning to run for president, but still," Ellis said.

We think Paul is right to note that Obama's State of the Union position was stronger than what he had expressed during the campaign, a point at which the tea party movement had not yet emerged. It's also worth noting that, so far in his term, Obama has only inconsistently carried out his stated policies on earmarks.

As president, Obama has signed legislation that included a significant number of earmarks. In his State of the Union address, he said would veto legislation with earmarks. Still, we think it's an oversimplification for Paul to imply that Obama had done a wholesale change on the issue, whether due to tea party pressure or some other reason. It would be inaccurate to describe Obama as someone who uncritically supported earmarks, at least after his first year or so in the Senate. In fact, as a candidate, he made three separate promises to rein them in. On balance, we rate Paul's statement Mostly True.