



Omnibus bills may be headed for extinction in Congress

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The "omnibus" spending measure in Congress may be heading for extinction. Or at least a temporary hiatus.

For more than a decade, lawmakers have relied mostly on passing these large and consolidated spending measures to fund government agencies from one fiscal year to the next. Omnibus bills sideline the regular legislative and committee process. It happens when the House and Senate can't agree on 12 spending bills that make up all of the funding for the federal government.

The House and Senate must pass another omnibus measure by Dec. 11 to avert a government shutdown. It comes after the House managed to pass only half of the one dozen appropriations measures. The Senate passed just one of those bills.

"These omnibus bills always seem to emerge late at night, before a weekend and are enacted within a couple days," said Steve Ellis, vice president of the watchdog group, Taxpayers for Common Sense. "This allows gimmicks and trickery to evade scrutiny and public vetting. In short, omnibus bills represent a terrible way to run the legislative railroad."

But next year, Congress may be able to avert an omnibus spending measure, thanks to new House leadership and a spending deal cut by former Speaker John Boehner before he retired. It will be a first in many years.

The last time Congress passed each appropriations measure was 2002, according to the Congressional Research Service. Lawmakers haven't cleared all appropriations measures by the annual Sept. 30 deadline since 1995.

"I am hopeful that next year might be a little different," said Mike Tanner, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Former Rep. Steven LaTourette, R-Ohio, who served on the House Appropriations Committee and now runs Main Street Partnership, said passing spending bills became more difficult as the GOP grappled with ways to reduce federal spending, a top GOP campaign promise and overall party priority.

"It's a cutting spending committee, which makes it more difficult on both sides of the aisle because you have more people who think the cuts are too much, and people who want to cut more," LaTourette said.

Three factors make it more likely Congress will return to "regular order" at least for next year, at least when it comes to spending legislation.

The first is new Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who took the gavel from Boehner last month with a pledge to return the House to a process that would require spending committees to pass legislation and then have the House consider each bill.

Ryan this month condemned the scheme used over the better part of a decade to pass spending bills, which involves rolling many of the individual appropriations measures into one major bill.

The final deal is typically negotiated behind closed doors between the president and the top leaders in the House and Senate.

"At that point, the bill would be pre-negotiated and the outcome pre-determined," Ryan said. "That's no way to conduct the people's business."

Ryan is already trying to open the process to all members. He ordered House appropriators last week to hold listening sessions on the six unfinished appropriations measures. It was a historic move that allowed any lawmaker to have a say on federal spending, even if that person did not have a seat on the House Appropriations Committee.

Congress will also have an easier time passing appropriations measures thanks to a deal cut by Boehner and President Obama that set spending caps for fiscal 2016 and 2017. The move eliminates the annual fight over how much money should be spent on the federal government and how to comply with federally mandated spending cuts.

"They've got the budget number," Tanner said, "They have new leadership." And, he added, "It's an election year."

The 2016 election is the third reason House and Senate lawmakers may avoid an omnibus spending bill next year.

Not only are House and Senate GOP leaders eager to show voters they can govern responsibly by passing spending bills on time, they will be determined to adjourn Congress in plenty of time for lawmakers to go home and campaign for re-election.

Congress typically tries to adjourn in late September or early October in election years. "If they can't do it next year," Tanner said. "It can't be done."