



Congress: Yes to pork, no to cutting debt

By Sean Lengell

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With a new fiscal year looming, Congress is poised to once again ignore one of its most essential responsibilities — passing its annual spending bills. And in doing do, many say lawmakers are missing an opportunity to trim pork, waste and duplicative services from the budget.

Instead, Congress is expected to once again kick their appropriating responsibilities down the road by simply continuing to fund government agencies at essentially the current rate, a process know as a “continuing resolution,” or CR.

Critics complain that continuing resolutions hurt government transparency because the measures typically are hammered out behind closed doors by party leaders in the days, or even hours, before a new fiscal year.

And because CRs basically freeze spending levels from year to year — though some cost increases are allowed — the measures make it difficult for lawmakers to chip away at the nation's ballooning debt and deficit.

“Many members want to reform the budget process or make policy changes through appropriations, and if Congress is not passing bills, then there’s really no way to generate change,” said Darrell West of the Brookings Institution, a liberal-leaning Washington think tank. “So it really reinforces the status quo and prevents Congress from moving forward.”

Critics add that because continuing resolutions are slapped together quickly, they're often used by party leaders as a way to bypass rank-and-file members — as well as the head of the appropriations committees — while advancing other legislative matters or deals.

“When you have this giant CR that’s going to be a couple of thousand pages long, the chances of something surprising being stuck in there are pretty good,” said Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, a free-market Washington think tank.

“The appropriations committees are a place where you sit and debate what you’re going to spend things on, and in theory it’s all done in public And I think the CR basically obscures all that.”

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 a constitutionally mandated annual process that is supposed to be handled through 12 massive appropriations bill. But when Congress left Washington earlier this month for its August break, none of the spending bills cleared both chambers.

And with lawmakers not scheduled to return until early September and with Capitol Hill calcified by partisan gridlock, there is little to no hope the appropriations process will be completed when the new fiscal year begins Oct. 1.

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 during the past two decades, bitter political wrangling has led Congress to routinely fail in its appropriations duties.

The last time Congress passed all 12 appropriations bills was for the 2006 fiscal year. And only twice since 2000 have both chambers passed all dozen measures in time for the start of the fiscal year. Over the past four years, Congress didn't pass any of its individual spending bills.

“Certainly the norm in Congress used to be that they would pass the spending bills, so the inability to do so now just shows how badly things have deteriorated and the inability of members to complete basic tasks,” West said.

Many lawmakers — particularly 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.

And government contractors complain that the uncertainty created by temporary funding measures make it difficult to budget their own operations.

Don Ritchie, the Senate's official historian, said Congress is only hurting itself by abdicating its appropriations duties because it weakens its authority over the White House.

“There are lot of instructions written into an appropriations bill to tell the executive agencies how to spend the money and what restrictions they have on them, and you can't change that with a continuing resolution,” he said. “Congress' power of the purse is perhaps its greatest strength — it's the legislative branch giving marching orders to the executive branch.”

“And by not passing appropriations bills they lose that, [lawmakers] diminish that.”