



Republicans in Congress shouldn't try to bring back earmarks

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Republicans in Congress have failed to repeal ObamaCare. They're contemplating an amnesty for illegal immigrants. Deficits this year could peak at a trillion dollars.

But you know what will fix all of that?

Bringing back earmarks!

This, at least, seems to be the mindset of congressional Republicans, given the recent announcement that the House Rules Committee will soon hold a hearing on, you guessed it, repealing the 2011 earmark ban.

Earmarks, you may recall, are those little pearls of congressionally directed spending that, at one time, were largely responsible for greasing the wheels of the legislative process.

Is a member holding out on a vote? Build them a bridge. It doesn't matter where. It could be to nowhere. Still haven't won them over? For shame! Give them a pile of taxpayer money to name a building after themselves. That should do it.

Members up for reelection relied on the fact that they could, quite literally, "bring home the bacon." In fiscal year 1999, for example, earmarks consumed more than 40 percent of the spending in that year's Military Construction appropriations bill.

The scramble for dollars resulted in the funding of absurd projects of dubious use. For example, earmarks are how we, the taxpayers, ended up funding tattoo removal in California, pest control in Guam, a water taxiservice on the aptly named Pleasure Beach in Connecticut, a sheep institute in Montana and a cowboy poetry gathering in Nevada.

More infamously, earmarks are also responsible for the corruption and subsequent jail terms of Reps. Randy “Duke” Cunningham (R-Calif.), Bob Ney (R-Ohio) and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

So why are earmarks making a comeback?

It may have something to do with the upcoming infrastructure bill, likely to be considered by Congress this year.

Transportation and infrastructure bills have long been the darling of earmark proponents.

The presence of 152 earmarks a 1987 transportation bill prompted President Reagan to veto it with the comment, “I haven’t seen this much lard since I handed out blue ribbons at the Iowa State Fair.”

Two decades later, the 2005 version of the same bill, included 5,671 earmarks.

So heavily have members relied on the pork barrel spending included in these bills that its elimination caused Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) to openly speculate about whether transportation bills would pass at all.

Reps. John Culberson (R-Texas), Mike Rogers (R-Ala.) Mike Kelly (R-Pa.) and others supporting the reinstatement of earmarks argue that they’re just trying to take back the power of the purse from the unelected bureaucrats currently making the spending decisions.

The problem with this argument is that the premise is false. Bureaucrats aren’t making the majority of transportation spending decisions. In fact, in the latest surface transportation bill, 92 percent of funding was distributed based on a funding formula that gives states and local governments the final say over funding decisions.

As the Cato Institute’s Michael Tanner pointedly observed, “Congressional concern about earmarks is less about who decides on spending than about who gets the credit at reelection time.”

Moreover, as much as proponents of earmarks want to argue that they’re harmless, history shows that earmarks and corruption go hand in hand. It’s no accident that some recent convictions of sitting U.S. congressmen have involved earmarks, as did one of the most notorious political scandals in recent memory. In one notorious case, an earmark ended up putting American troops at risk.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) put it more bluntly: “The more powerful you are, the most likely it is you get the earmark in. Therefore, it is a corrupt system.”

His former colleague and earmark warrior, Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), called earmarking “a sick way to run a business, to have to bribe somebody to get something done and politicians use it to look good at home. Even if it may not be in the best interest of the country, it’s in the best interest of the politician. And it’s the wrong way to spend money.”

Congressional Republicans have more than enough to keep them busy in 2018, including a funding deadline on January 19, another opportunity to repeal Obamacare in the upcoming budget reconciliation, and preventing Democrats from rolling them on amnesty.

Choosing to return to smoke-filled rooms and funding for pet projects ahead of these vital priorities will certainly not inspire the voters in the upcoming 2018 midterms. As my boss, former Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) noted, “There is nothing in our oath of office that says we will protect and defend parochial projects.”

Congressional Republicans would do well to heed the reminder.