



Sadly, fiscal restraint is no longer a core principle of the GOP

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April 11, 2018

The omnibus budget bill passed in March increased spending 13 percent in a single year and undermines any Republican claim that it is the party of fiscal responsibility. Majorities of Republicans in both the House and Senate voted for the bill, which jacked up defense and nondefense (domestic) spending.

The GOP is now considering a rescission package to undo some of the spending — and undo some of the political damage with their conservative base.

Why did the GOP vote for the omnibus to begin with? Some conservative commentators are suggesting that President Trump and Republicans were cornered by the Democrats and only agreed to domestic spending increases because they wanted defense increases.

Sean Hannity said that the Republicans got “taken to the woodshed by Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.” He also said, “Whatever happened to the party that believed in fiscal responsibility? ... They need to go back to their core principles.”

In the Wall Street Journal, Kimberley Strassel said that Trump “felt pressured to sign it,” while the “Democrats used the bill to hold the military hostage to their own domestic boondoggles.”

It is true that the Democrats often outsmart the Republicans. But is fiscal responsibility really a “core principle” of the GOP?

I don’t think it has been in years. We are facing \$1 trillion deficits not because Democrats are pushing the GOP to accept higher spending, but because most Republicans in Congress support higher spending on nearly all defense and domestic activities.

You can see this by looking at the Republican response to President Trump's proposed February budget. Trump proposed cuts to an array of welfare-state programs, such as community development, education, energy subsidies, farm subsidies, foreign aid, public housing and many other things.

In recent weeks, cabinet secretaries have defended these proposals in testimony to Congress. But rather than embracing the cuts, Republican members have given them little support.

My intern, John Postiglione, and I confirmed this by watching seven recent House appropriations hearings and taking note of what each Republican member said. The hearings focused on the budgets for the Departments of Commerce, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Labor and Treasury, and each hearing included the relevant cabinet secretary.

We found that not a single Republican member made a supportive comment about a specific Trump spending cut during the seven hearings. The hearings included 47 five-minute comments by 26 different Republican members.

Furthermore, numerous Republicans appeared to oppose Trump's cuts:

- In the commerce hearing, Rep. Hal Rogers (R-Ky.) and Rep. Evan Jenkins (R-W.Va.) opposed cuts to the Economic Development Administration (EDA).
- In the education hearing, Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) opposed cuts to impact aid, academic enrichment grants and other subsidies.
- In the energy hearing, Rep. Jaime Beutler (R-Wash.) opposed privatizing the power marketing administrations, while Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-Wash.) opposed cuts to energy subsidies.
- In the HHS hearing, Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-N.J.) opposed cuts to numerous programs.
- In the HUD hearing, Rep. David Valadao (R-Calif.) opposed cuts to community development.
- In the labor hearing, Cole and Rep. Chuck Fleischmann (R-Tenn.) opposed cuts to Job Corps.

Some members were subtle in their opposition to cuts, but others were not. In the commerce hearing, Rogers said that the EDA was crucial to “keep our people at home and prevent starvation.” That is a ridiculous claim, yet the omnibus hiked the EDA budget by 9 percent.

Not only did some Republicans oppose spending cuts during the hearings, many of them made supportive comments about spending on programs they viewed as important to their districts.

This is all very disheartening because President Trump set the stage for spending reforms by proposing perhaps the largest cuts to liberal, big-government programs since President Reagan. Trump provided congressional Republicans a great opportunity to push hard for cuts — an opportunity that they have completely blown.

We looked at appropriations hearings, but a similar pro-spending tilt is evident on the authorizing committees, such as the agriculture and transportation committees. Some Republicans, such as those in the House Freedom Caucus, do push for spending cuts, but they are far outnumbered even within their own party.

Again, on reviewing recent budget hearings, we did not find any supportive statements for any of President Trump's specific cuts. A number of Republicans made comments generally supportive of fiscal restraint, but that does not move the ball forward if we actually want to downsize programs and tame rising deficits.

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