

# WORLD MAGAZINE

## Congressional chaos

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President Donald Trump hinged his campaigns in 2016 and 2020 on being a change agent in Washington, D.C. As the final days of 2020, Trump's administration, and the 116th Congress waned, his war of words against last-minute legislation changed political alliances and battle lines.

Although several members said they didn't have enough time to read the entire bill, the House of Representatives on Dec. 21 passed a 5,500-page, \$2.3 trillion spending package that included funding for the government and coronavirus relief.

Despite its length (the Cato Institute noted the bill would stretch for nearly a mile if each page were laid out end-to-end), the Senate passed the package the next day. Among its \$900 billion in coronavirus provisions: \$600 relief checks per qualifying American, weekly \$300 federal unemployment subsidies through March 14, a federal eviction moratorium extension, and the continuation of the Paycheck Protection Program to help struggling businesses.

Lawmakers from both parties and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin spent months negotiating the deal, even after it logjammed ahead of the Nov. 3 election. But soon after it passed Congress, Trump lambasted the package and demanded \$2,000 for each qualifying American instead of \$600. He threatened a veto but eventually signed the relief bill while calling on Congress to increase direct payments to Americans.

On that proposal, Democratic leaders like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and President-elect Joe Biden sided with Trump—after spending the better part of four years criticizing the president at nearly every turn and leading impeachment proceedings against him. “The president of the United States has put this forth as something that he wants to see,” Pelosi said from the House floor while pushing to increase the relief payments.

Trump's call to increase the \$900 billion in coronavirus aid by additional hundreds of billions of dollars pitted Republicans—who historically prided themselves on fiscal conservatism—against

the rising populism Trump rode to the White House in 2016 and put some GOP leaders in a tough spot. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., held up a vote on the increased checks on Dec. 29, but indicated he'd try to address Trump's demands. By then, Republican Sens. Marco Rubio, Josh Hawley, Lindsey Graham, and Deb Fischer said they supported the bigger checks. So did Georgia Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, just days away from runoff elections against Democratic challengers to determine which party would control the Senate in the 117th Congress.

Republicans such as Sens. Ted Cruz and Rand Paul blasted the overall spending package and its price tag. The \$2.3 trillion in spending Congress passed before Christmas comes when the national debt is already at \$27 trillion, \$6.7 trillion more than when Trump took office in 2017. "Generations of Americans are already stuck with a \$27 trillion national debt, and Washington politicians are indiscriminately adding to the tab," Cruz said.

While Republicans and Democrats comingled in the COVID-19 relief fight, Trump's pre-Christmas veto of the \$740 billion National Defense Authorization Act redrew other political lines of battle, pitting the legislative branch against the executive branch. The House quickly voted to override Trump's veto, while the COVID-19 relief debate complicated McConnell's similar effort in the Senate, where Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., tried to delay the override vote until McConnell called for a separate vote on the relief checks. The move aligned Sanders and Trump against McConnell. Sanders and Republican Hawley had previously teamed up to encourage larger relief checks before Congress voted on the \$600 checks.

After four years of fighting between Republicans and Democrats—with Republicans mostly standing with Trump on issue after issue—the president's rhetoric was jarring: "Republican leadership only wants the path of least resistance. Our leaders (not me, of course!) are pathetic."