



## 'Luster gone' for appropriations panel

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Republican leaders this week named four incoming freshmen to the Senate Appropriations Committee — another sign the historically powerful panel is losing relevance and appeal among lawmakers.

A spot on the Senate Appropriations Committee used to be a highly coveted assignment that would take years to earn. Not anymore, as the once-routine practice of Congress passing annual spending bills has given way in recent years to last-minute mega “omnibus” bills or “continuing resolutions” that essentially freeze spending.

The process, which was repeated Saturday when lawmakers passed a \$1.1 trillion measure to fund most federal agencies through September, in part has diminished the role of appropriators.

“For many decades, the appropriations committees were among the most desirable places to serve. ... They were leadership panels that served as guardians of taxpayer money, keeping it from being wasted,” said Norm Ornstein, a congressional expert with the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank.

“But now the panels are all pain and no gain — managing painful cuts in almost all programs amid deep partisan and ideological divisions over priorities. The luster is gone.”

Incoming GOP freshmen Sens. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, James Lankford of Oklahoma and Steve Daines of Montana earned places on the committee for the 114th Congress, which convenes in early January.

The four aren't strangers to Capitol Hill, as all currently are House members. But none served on the House Appropriations Committee.

Senate Democrats are still finalizing their lineup for the committee, a spokesman said.

A spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who will become majority leader in the new Congress, said committee assignments largely are based on member choice, adding that this has been a longstanding policy.

But the last freshman to serve on the Senate Appropriations Committee was Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., in 1992-93, according to CQ Roll Call records. And the 97th Congress, in 1981-82, was the last time at least four freshmen from either party sat on the panel.

Another hint of the waning influence of appropriators was a decision by Daniel Coats, R-Ind., to leave the panel for a seat on the Senate Finance Committee, another powerful revenue-related panel that deals largely with tax writing.

“That committee will get tax reform [responsibilities], and there is a way to dispense favors in a tax reform bill,” said Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank. “There are alternatives out there [to appropriations committees] — appropriations isn’t necessarily the only game in town.”

Disdain for putting “earmarks” — money for pet projects — into spending bills also has weakened the authority of appropriators.

“That used to be the real power of appropriations — not just the stuff that they could do above board, but it was all the little earmarks that they could tuck in,” Tanner said. “There [are] still enough old guards ... who still live on pork, but there are more Republicans that are kind of appalled by that sort of thing, or at least give the appearance” they are.

And boasting of bringing pork back home can actually backfire for Republicans these days.

“Being on an appropriations committee saying 'I brought home the bacon' doesn’t seem to be as effective among some [lawmakers] in their constituency these days,” Tanner said. “In some ways it stirs up the Tea Party.”

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 bills. But when Congress finished its 2014 business late Tuesday, none of the spending bills had cleared both chambers.

The last time Congress passed all dozen of its 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 hasn’t passed any of its individual spending bills.

McConnell has said he wants to return the chamber to the “regular order” of drafting and passing appropriations bill. And with Republicans controlling both chambers in the New Year, the odds that Congress will pass at least some individual spending bills appears to have increased.

Still, with partisan gridlock expected to again grip Capitol Hill in the new Congress, such a scenario is anything but certain.

The committee “is just not what it once was, which was the center of power in Washington,” Tanner said.