



Research

The Appropriations Committee: Under assault

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No wonder David Obey retired.

Last night, Alan Mollohan, the West Virginia Democratic congressman and proud member of the House Appropriations Committee, lost his primary against an opponent who attacked the incumbent's behavior on the committee.

Over the weekend, Bob Bennett (R-Utah), a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, lost in his efforts to gain his party's nomination to run for reelection.

Next week, it is looking increasingly likely that another appropriator, Sen. Arlen Specter (D-Pa.), might lose his party's primary. Specter switched political parties because he knew he couldn't win the nomination of the Republican primary voter.

Congressman John Murtha (D-Pa.), who died earlier this year, was under intense scrutiny from the ethics committee and from the Justice Department for alleged malfeasance on the committee. It looks like his seat will go to the Republicans.

Two years ago, the longtime Appropriations Committee chairman, Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), narrowly lost his bid to win reelection because of an ethical cloud dusted up by a Justice Department indictment. His case was later thrown out.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), and longtime member of the Appropriations Committee, resigned from Congress four years ago under an ethical cloud. Ex-Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-Calif.) actually is spending quality time in jail because he auctioned off earmarks to the highest bidder.

The Appropriations Committee's function is defined quite clearly in the Constitution. Article 1, Section 9, Clause 7 of the U.S. Constitution states:

“No money shall be drawn from the treasury, but in consequence of appropriations made by law; and a regular statement and account of receipts and expenditures of all public money shall be published from time to time.”

The committee itself was founded in the aftermath of the Civil War, as the Congress decided to take some power away from the Ways and Means Committee, which already had plenty of things to do, raising revenues and imposing tariffs, and start a new committee whose only role was spending federal money.

In 1965, the Appropriations Committee controlled fully 62 percent of the federal budget. But because of the passage of Medicare, Medicaid, various farm programs, the explosion in the costs of paying for Social Security, clever Transportation Committee spending and, of course, the costs of servicing the debt, the Approps Committee now controls only 38 percent of the budget, and that number is going down every year.

The committee gets a bad rap for earmark spending. Everybody hates earmarks, except for those who live in districts that actually get them. But earmarks, which make up less than 2 percent of the federal budget, aren't the cause of our deficit and debt problems. Entitlements are the real culprit.

But that doesn't really matter to most voters.

When I first started working in the Congress, the Appropriations Committee was filled with all kinds of characters. Jamie Whitten, a Mississippi Democrat and longtime chairman, was almost unintelligible as he came to the floor to defend the work product of the committee, but few were willing to cross him. Silvio Conte, the charismatic liberal Republican from Massachusetts and longtime ranking member, would similarly defend the prerogatives of the committee. Charlie Wilson would cut deals and win the war in Afghanistan, almost single-handedly.

It used to be said that there were three political parties in Congress: Republicans, Democrats and appropriators. The appropriators were notorious for protecting their own turf and fighting together to resist the influence of leadership.

But the leadership fought back, threatening to punish those who resisted their entreaties. And the committee became more partisan, less collegial and less effective.

Over the years, the committee gained a reputation not for efficiency or high ethical standards, but as a place where members cut deals to benefit themselves personally or, worse, to benefit friendly lobbyists.

And as its reputation became tarnished, it became more and more of a liability to serve on the once-powerful perch that used to assure reelection.

The Appropriations Committee deserves some, but not all, of the blame for its decline. Because it refused to open its procedures to the public, it became suspect by all who worried about corruption. Because of arrogance, it refused to reform its earmarking process until it was too late.

Now appropriators are dropping like flies. Four years ago, it was unthinkable that an Alan Mollohan would lose a primary fight in West Virginia, a place that actually really needs the federal dollars. But now it is a reality.

The once-mighty Appropriations Committee is now a shell of its former self.

It has lost its luster, and now it is losing its members, in primary battles, of all things.

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