



The Daily Dish

Congress Does Its Job (Sort Of)

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Eakinomics: Congress Does Its Job (Sort Of)

It has become commonplace to bemoan the fact that Washington is broken, Congress dysfunctional, and the nation's priorities left unaddressed. And there is no more vivid example than Congress's bread-and-butter task of funding the government.

Recall that the 1974 Budget Act set up a process by which Congress would accept the president's budget, pass in each house and then agree jointly on a [budget resolution](#) laying out spending and revenue totals, and pass and send to the president the annual appropriations bills that fund the government. All of this work would be tidied up by September 30, in time for the new fiscal year to begin on October 1. The prescribed process, however, has rarely been followed in practice. In particular, on only four occasions has Congress passed all of the appropriations bills on schedule.

Instead, the public has been treated to a steady diet of funding gaps, government shutdowns, and an over-reliance on [continuing resolutions](#) (CRs). Beyond the conspicuous process failures evinced by government shutdowns, CRs themselves pose risks that can raise costs, incur waste, and present management challenges.

On the surface, perhaps, this year looks like more of the same. The Wall Street Journal [reported](#), "The House passed an appropriations bill on Wednesday that increases military spending for the next fiscal year and keeps the government open through Dec. 7, leaving the legislation in President Trump's hands days before funding expires on Oct. 1. The president Wednesday dismissed concerns that a budget dispute would lead to a shutdown. 'We're going to keep the government open,' Mr. Trump said."

But underneath the surface, Congress has been much more successful than in many years. Earlier, it packaged together the appropriations for the Energy Department and Veteran's Affairs Department as a so-called "minibus" appropriations bill. The president has signed this bill into law. This week, it passed the combined appropriations for the Department of Defense, Labor Department, Department of Health and Human Services, and Education Department. As noted above, it also includes a continuing resolution through December 7 for those departments not yet funded (notably Homeland Security, which contains the contentious border wall issue). But importantly, the funding for three-quarters of the government is in place for the full 2019 fiscal year.

It is easy to criticize Congress. But quietly its performance has improved – and improved in the area that requires the greatest bipartisan cooperation.