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Defense Primer: Defense Appropriations Process

The Constitution gives Congress the power of the purse in Article I, Section 9, which provides that “No money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law.” To fulfill this duty, Congress annually considers appropriations measures, which provide funding for numerous activities—such as national defense, education, and homeland security—consistent with policies and priorities established through various enacted measures, such as the National Defense Authorization Act.

The congressional appropriations process includes various rules and practices that Congress has adopted to distinguish appropriations measures and facilitate their consideration. These measures generally provide funding authority in response to the President’s budget request for a fiscal year (October 1 through September 30).

Committees of Jurisdiction

The House and Senate Committees on Appropriations exercise jurisdiction over discretionary spending, including most defense funding, in annual appropriations measures. Each committee has 12 subcommittees, each of which is responsible for developing one regular annual appropriations bill. These measures determine which department activities will be funded. House and Senate Appropriations subcommittee jurisdictions are generally parallel. The main subcommittees that deal with defense matters are

- *Subcommittees on Defense*, with jurisdiction over appropriations for the Departments of Army, Navy (including the Marine Corps), and Air Force (including the Space Force); the Office of the Secretary of Defense; defense agencies; and intelligence activities.
- *Subcommittees on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies*, with jurisdiction over appropriations for the Military Construction, Chemical Demilitarization Construction, Military Family Housing Construction and Operation and Maintenance, and Base Realignment and Closure accounts; the NATO Security Investment Program; the Department of Veterans Affairs; and other related agencies.
- *Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development*, with jurisdiction over all defense-related activities of the Department of Energy, including the National Nuclear Security Administration. This subcommittee also has jurisdiction over the civil works activities of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, among other nondefense activities.

The Congressional Budget Resolution

The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-344) provides for the annual consideration

of a concurrent resolution on the budget, which allows Congress to establish overall budgetary and fiscal policy to be implemented through enactment of subsequent legislation. The budget resolution, in part, establishes a limit on total new budget authority and outlay levels divided among 20 functional categories—such as national defense, agriculture, and transportation—that set spending priorities.

In the absence of agreement on a budget resolution, Congress may establish an enforceable limit on appropriations through alternate means, such as a deeming resolution or a statute.

Once Congress has established the total, Section 302(a) of the Congressional Budget Act requires it to be allocated among all committees with spending jurisdiction. This establishes ceilings on spending for legislation reported from each committee that can be enforced procedurally through points of order during consideration of the legislation. All discretionary spending is allocated to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, which are required to subdivide this allocation among their 12 subcommittees under Section 302(b) of the Congressional Budget Act. These suballocations are also enforceable during consideration of legislation, preventing the consideration of amendments that would increase funding above these limits.

Committee Processes

Upon receipt of the President’s budget request, the appropriations subcommittees generally begin a series of hearings in which the senior civilian and military leadership of the Department of Defense, the military services, and certain defense agencies are invited to testify before the subcommittees on the budget request.

At the same time, Members of Congress, including those not serving on the Appropriations Committees, may submit requests and make recommendations concerning proposed programmatic levels and language to be included in appropriations bills and committee reports.

After conducting these hearings, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees make suballocations to the subcommittees, which begin to draft, mark up, and report the appropriations bills to the full committees. The full committees conduct markups and may adopt amendments to a subcommittee’s recommendations before reporting the bills and making them available for floor consideration. In addition to drafting the bills, the subcommittees also prepare reports, which include information required by House and Senate rules, explain committee actions, and provide guidance and directives to agencies. Committee reports may not be amended directly during floor proceedings.

House and Senate Consideration

Traditionally, the House initiates consideration of regular appropriations measures, although the Senate Appropriations Committee may draft or report appropriations legislation in anticipation of House action. The House Appropriations Committee generally begins reporting the appropriations bills to the House in May or June. Once reported from committee, an appropriations bill may be scheduled for floor consideration. In the House, current practice is to consider the bill under the terms of a special rule (reported by the House Rules Committee) that structures the conditions of debate and specifies possible floor amendments to the bill. In some cases, the Rules Committee may provide for consideration of multiple appropriations measures as a single measure. After being debated, amended, and passed by the House, the measure is sent to the Senate.

The Senate Appropriations Committee typically begins reporting the bills in June. The recent practice has generally been for the Senate to consider the text of a bill as reported by its Appropriations Committee in the form of a complete substitute amendment for the House-passed bill. In the Senate, floor debate and amendment consideration is typically structured pursuant to multiple unanimous consent agreements. However, one or more cloture processes (by which three-fifths of the Senate, typically 60 Senators, votes to limit consideration) may be necessary for the Senate to reach a final vote on certain amendments or on the bill itself.

Resolving Differences

The Constitution requires that the House and Senate approve the same measure in precisely the same form before it may be presented to the President for signature or veto. Consequently, once the House and Senate have both completed initial consideration of an appropriations measure, the Appropriations Committees in each chamber will endeavor to negotiate a resolution of the differences between their respective versions. The House and Senate can agree to convene a conference committee to conduct this negotiation and propose a package settlement of all their disagreements. Alternatively, agreement may be reached through an exchange of amendments between the chambers.

Whether a conference committee or exchange of amendments is used to resolve differences between the chambers on the annual defense appropriations bill, negotiators are typically drawn from the Defense Subcommittees of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. When a conference committee is used, conferees are generally required by House and Senate rules to negotiate within the scope of the differences between the versions of the bill and report the result of their negotiation in the form of a conference report. Completion of the conference report is not on a specified timeline, so negotiations are concluded only when a majority of the conferees from each chamber sign the conference report.

Once reported by the conference committee, a conference report is subject to floor debate during consideration but is not amendable. (In the Senate, reaching a vote on the conference report may require three-fifths of the Senate to

invoke cloture.) If the House and Senate each agree to the conference report, the measure is enrolled for presentation to the President.

While Congress has historically considered each regular appropriations bill separately, in current practice, the House and Senate frequently have chosen to combine several appropriations bills into a single legislative vehicle prior to enactment, referred to as omnibus appropriations measures.

Continuing Resolutions

If the appropriations process is not completed prior to the start of a fiscal year (October 1), Congress may enact one or more measures to provide temporary funding authority pending the final disposition of that regular appropriations bill, either separately or as part of an omnibus measure. Because budget authority is typically provided for a single fiscal year, temporary funding measures are necessary for a regular appropriations measure that has not been enacted prior to the beginning of a fiscal year, which could cause a funding gap and require an agency to cease non-excepted activities. Traditionally, temporary funding is provided in the form of a joint resolution to allow agencies or programs to continue to obligate funds at a particular rate (such as the rate of operations for the previous fiscal year) for a specific period of time, which may range from a single day to an entire fiscal year. These measures are known as continuing resolutions (or CRs).

Additional Defense Funding

In addition to the amounts provided in a regular appropriations measure, the President may request, and Congress may enact, additional funding in other legislation. This can be in the form of one or more supplemental appropriations measures (or supplementals). These have been used to provide funding for unforeseen needs, such as responses to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Like regular appropriations bills, supplementals provide specific amounts of funding for individual accounts rather than funding based on a rate of operations (like a CR). Additional funding may also be in the form of direct spending enacted as part of legislation other than a regular or supplemental appropriations act, such as a reconciliation act. For example, defense funding was provided in P.L. 119-21, the act to provide for reconciliation pursuant to title II of H.Con.Res. 14, often referred to as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

CRS Product

CRS Report R47106, *The Appropriations Process: A Brief Overview*, by James V. Saturno and Megan S. Lynch

Note for congressional clients only: For questions on the appropriations process, contact James V. Saturno; for defense appropriations, contact Cameron Keys.

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