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Earmarks Are Not the Problem

Last week President Trump urged Congress to reassert its constitutional authority to direct how federal agencies spend taxpayer dollars. Ironically, many constitutional conservatives and libertarians disagree with the president. The reason is, President Trump wants Congress to reassert its authority by bringing back earmarks.



Earmarks are line items in spending bills directing federal agencies to spend federal funds on specific projects in a representative or senator's district or state. Congress ended the practice of earmarks several years ago after a public outcry fueled by a widespread misunderstanding of the issue.

Earmarks are added to spending bills after the spending levels have been determined. Therefore, earmarks do not increase federal spending. What earmarks do is limit the federal bureaucrats' ability to decide how to spend taxpayer money.

When I served in Congress, I was amazed when self-proclaimed constitutionalists complained about how earmarks prevented funding of federal bureaucrats' priorities. These "constitutionalists" seem to have forgotten that the Constitution gives Congress sole authority over deciding how taxpayer dollars should be spent.

My support for earmarks in Congress did not add one penny to the spending in the bills. I believed that some of the tax money sent to Washington should actually make it back to Congressional districts rather than remain in the hands of Washington bureaucrats. In the end, I always voted against final passage of the bloated spending bills.

Some call earmarks a gateway drug to big spending. They point to how congressional leadership denied earmarks to members unless the members voted for big spending and other anti-liberty legislation. It is true that congressional leadership used earmarks to reward and punish members. During my years in Congress, earmarks for my district were stripped from bills in an (unsuccessful) attempt to make me stop voting against unconstitutional legislation.

Congressional leaders do not need earmarks to reward or punish members. They can, for example, deny plum committee assignments to those who refuse to toe the party line, or discourage donors from supporting them.

Presidents can still use the promise of federal funds to influence congressional votes. "Presidential earmarks" were crucial to passing Obamacare, and President Trump has threatened to withhold aid from states whose senators oppose his agenda. The removal of earmarks has given the president even greater influence over the legislative branch!

The fact that there are more representatives and senators willing to vote against big government than in past years has nothing to do with the lack of earmarks. Instead, the liberty movement has led to more



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liberty-minded members being elected to the House and Senate.

While the ideas of liberty are growing in popularity, the majority of the people and certainly most politicians still believe the US government should run the economy, run the world, and run our lives. This misplaced faith in big government, not the presence of earmarks, is why most politicians vote for big spending. No politician ever said, “Now that I can’t receive earmarks, I am abandoning my support for the welfare-warfare state.”

Earmarks are a way for elected representatives to ensure their constituents’ tax dollars are spent in a manner that matches constituent priorities. Earmarks do not by themselves expand government. Those who oppose earmarks should work to stop so many Americans from demanding government-provided economic and personal security. Earmarks are not the cause of runaway spending, and removing them has done little or nothing to shrink government and regain our liberties.

Ron Paul is a former U.S. congressman from Texas. This article originally appeared at the [Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity](#) and is reprinted here with permission.



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