



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on February 28, 2013

Senate Republicans Consider Handing Purse Strings to President

With budget sequestration looming and no deal to avert it in sight, Senate Republicans, eager to avoid blame for any cuts, have devised a strategy that is as unconstitutional as it is ill-advised: Let the president decide what to cut.

According to [Politico](#), Senators Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) and Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), with “the tacit support of Senate GOP leaders,” have been circulating a draft bill that would suspend the \$85 billion in spending cuts required by the sequester. Instead, it would give President Barack Obama until March 8 to come up with an alternative that achieves the same level of savings in the same proportions: Fifty percent from domestic discretionary spending and 50 percent from defense spending. Once Obama laid out his plan, Congress could either allow the plan to become law or pass a resolution of disapproval, by simple majority vote of both houses, by March 22.

Congressional disapproval would not, however, be the end of the story. The president could sign the resolution, thereby deep-sixing his own plan in favor of the sequestration. On the other hand, he could veto the resolution, and then the usual two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress would be required to override his veto, restoring the sequestration.

The plan, which *Politico* aptly describes as an “elaborate, almost Rube Goldberg construct,” is supported by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who said, “The goal isn’t to hand over congressional authority. It’s to make sure these cuts actually happen.”

Of course, if McConnell really wants to ensure that the cuts take place, there is a much simpler way of going about it. All Republicans have to do is not offer a plan of their own and then filibuster any bills the Democrats advance. *Voilà!* The sequester takes effect.

Clearly, then, there is more to this move than simply ensuring that budget cuts occur. If Congress does nothing, or if it puts forth its own plan to avoid sequestration, Congress will get the blame for whatever cuts take place. But if the president is given *carte blanche* to decide what will be cut, he will become the scapegoat.

“It’s a game,” [Sen. Bernie Sanders \(I-Vt.\)](#) told MSNBC’s *Jansing & Co.* “The president himself becomes the bad guy; he owns the sequestration. He’s the guy who’s blamed for cutting defense or Head Start.”

Proponents of the plan, which is similar to one suggested by [Karl Rove](#), argue that it’s merely about





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getting the cuts made in a different way — an objective that has eluded the 535 people in Congress but might be attained by a single individual.

“We need to preserve the magnitude of the cuts, but I think almost everybody agrees that it would be better off if they were done differently,” Toomey told Pennsylvania reporters. “We’re talking about giving the president this discretion for a matter of several months. It’s from now to the end of this fiscal year.”

This, however, is the same logic that has given rise to dictatorships over and over again; and according to *Politico*, not all Republicans are swallowing it:

“Congress has a constitutional responsibility to authorize and appropriate for the nation’s security,” [Sen. John] McCain [R-Ariz.] said Tuesday. “And why give that responsibility over [to] the president of the United States — and that renders us not just ineffective but irrelevant.”

Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby, the ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, is wary of ceding too much power to Obama to shift dollars.

“We ought to be watching that,” Shelby said. “You give a president all the power in the world, you’re giving up a lot.”

Some GOP senators are even offering an alternative plan. Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) is circulating a draft bill that would achieve the same savings as the sequester but with the vast majority of the cuts occurring in domestic spending. Ayotte’s plan was developed in conjunction with McCain and Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), giving it considerable heft.

Democrats have their own plan, naturally. It calls for a minimum 30-percent tax on millionaires that Democrats expect to raise \$55 billion in revenue, along with an equivalent amount of spending cuts, divided equally between defense and farm programs.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) says he will allow a floor vote today on both his own party’s bill and one of the Republicans’ bills. The Democrats’ bill is expected to fail because it will not attain the 60 votes needed to overcome a Republican filibuster. Whichever bill the Republicans offer — assuming they can even unite behind a single one — is also likely to fail. But if it did pass the Senate and, later, the House of Representatives, it would almost certainly be vetoed by the president. [USA Today](#) reports that “the White House contends they will not support any sequester alternative that doesn’t include both revenue increases and spending cuts.” Besides, Obama probably has no desire to be the fall guy for spending cuts, as insignificant as they are (barely two percent of the entire budget).

The good news, then, is that the plan to cede Congress’s constitutional power of the purse to the executive branch is almost certain to be defeated. The bad news is that there are actually Republicans in the Senate, including their leaders, who thought it was a good idea in the first place.



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