How to Pass Spending Bills on Time This Year

President Barack Obama recently signed, in private, the bill providing regular appropriations for domestic programs, more than five months after the fiscal year began. His apparent embarrassment was because the bill included more than 8,500 earmarks, the objects of extended attacks in the Senate. The president also proposed additional reforms for earmarks, as did the Democratic leadership in Congress.

As expected, the “porkbusters” are dissatisfied with these reforms. A ceiling for earmarks of “only” 1 percent of discretionary appropriations is still “real money,” as former Senator Jon Kyl used to say. Requiring competitive bidding only for earmarks to forecast and bid for earmarks is still “real money,” as for earmarks, as did the Democratic leadership in Congress.

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In general, though, the proposed reforms respond to the porkbusters’ demand for greater transparency. Legislators will be required to identify the earmarks they request, and agencies can review and comment on earmarks before enactment. The provisions should make earmarks more comparable to projects that undergo rigorous reviews and programs that must meet cost efficiencies, rather than hypocratically oppose bills that include earmarks they requested.

The obvious objection to this deal is that it would encourage pork-swinging Senators to engage in dilatory actions to prevent bills from passing by the end of September. So what’s new about that? Actually, what would be new is that their fellow Senators who want earmarks for their constituencies would now be more likely to enact cloture and pass bills on time, rather than hypocritically oppose bills that include earmarks they requested.

When the political incentives instead fade, as it is the case now, agencies cannot execute their budgets efficiently — they don’t know how much they have to spend until months into the fiscal year. Eliminating that waste would exceed any savings from killing earmarks.

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