

APPROPRIATIONS TRANSPARENCY ACT WOULD PROVIDE VITAL SUNLIGHT ON SPENDING BILLS

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Congress recently considered a six-bill appropriations package, but it remains unclear exactly how much new spending authority was provided to federal agencies.

We know the bill was filled with gimmicks to drive up spending above the Fiscal Responsibility Act caps, but the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) never provided Members of Congress with full analysis of the appropriations bill. (A summary CBO score was released, but vital details, such as CHIMPs and rescissions were not included.)

Appropriations bills are the most important legislation affecting federal spending considered by Congress on a regular basis. Despite this, CBO does not provide formal cost estimates on the regular appropriations bills.

That is because a loophole in Section 402 of the Budget Act carves out bills reported by the House or Senate Appropriations Committees from the requirement that CBO prepare cost estimates for legislation reported by other committees.

To fix this problem, Representative Glenn Grothman (R-WI) has introduced H.R. 7584, the Appropriations Transparency Act, to close the loophole and finally require CBO to provide cost estimates for appropriations bills.

The Appropriations Transparency Act would require CBO's cost estimates for appropriations bills to include:

- Total discretionary budget authority and outlays;
- Rescissions of budget authority and the resulting changes in outlays;
- Changes in Mandatory Programs (CHIMPs);
- Offsetting receipts and collections;
- Direct spending and any authorizing provisions; and
- A comparison of the net total discretionary budget authority and the 302 allocations.

The proposal would also require notations of how spending in appropriations bills are categorized, such as Defense or Non-Defense categories subject to discretionary caps, as well as disaster, emergency, program integrity, and other adjustments to caps.

Requiring full cost estimates on appropriations bills from Congress's non-partisan official scorekeeper would be an important step towards transparency and uniformity in understanding the fiscal implications of spending legislation.

The appropriations loophole does not prohibit CBO from conducting analyses of appropriations bills.

In fact, CBO has disclosed that it “provides detailed reports showing estimates of the discretionary budget authority provided and the outlays that would occur in that year, including the estimated budgetary effects of provisions that make changes in mandatory programs,” including “account-level details.”

These analyses are provided to the Appropriations Committee and other “interested parties in the Congress.” However, the data is not widely distributed to all Members of Congress, their staff, or the public.

CBO testified seven years ago that it was “developing a plan to make that information available to the public in an accessible format.” While CBO has since then publicly provided additional information about appropriations bills, it has yet to make all relevant analysis available.

To fix this problem, close the loophole, and provide essential transparency about appropriations bills, Congress could enact the Appropriations Transparency Act, or the Chair of the Budget Committee could require CBO to make this important information available publicly.