CBO Promises Congress Analysis of Appropriations Bills — But Only After They Are Enacted

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The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is supposed to provide nonpartisan information to help Members of Congress make better decisions about fiscal and economic policy.

The CBO's cost estimates and analysis provide invaluable data that shapes debate about legislative proposals.

However, the CBO recently announced that it will provide certain information about appropriations bills *only after they have been passed by Congress into law*.

In response to questioning from Rep. Andrew Clyde (R-GA-9), the CBO said:

> "Having consulted with the House and Senate Appropriations and Budget Committees, CBO will begin posting detailed reports for the fiscal year 2026 appropriation bills **soon after they are enacted**." [emphasis added]

In other words, the CBO says that Congress has to pass the appropriations bills so they can find out what is in it.

Upfront transparency is essential for the policymaking process to function. Releasing information that the CBO has in its possession *only after* Congress has completed debate does not make sense.

Loophole in the Budget Act Limits Transparency for Appropriations Bills

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

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

The CBO sometimes releases a summary score, but vital details, such as the total new budget authority, changes in mandatory programs (CHIMPs), rescissions, and other account level scoring are not included.

The appropriations loophole does not prohibit the CBO from analyzing appropriations bills. The CBO disclosed in 2023 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" to certain individuals.

These analyses are provided to the Appropriations Committees and other "interested parties in the Congress." The CBO testified in 2017 that it was "developing a plan to make that information available to the public in an accessible format." However, that data has not been widely distributed to all Members of Congress, their staff, or the public.

Congress Should Demand Transparent Scoring of Appropriations Bills

Requiring full cost estimates on appropriations bills from Congress's nonpartisan official scorekeeper would be an important step toward transparency and a uniform understanding the fiscal implications of spending legislation.

The committee reports from the House and Senate Appropriations Committees include tables describing the committees' scorekeeping for provisions in appropriations bills. However, the presentation of these committee tables is inconsistent across the 12 subcommittees and between the House and Senate. They also lack details that are shown in the CBO's nonpublic scoring runs, such as outlay rates and other identifying characteristics of budget accounts.

The lack of transparency allows appropriations bills to be packed with gimmicks that hide the true level of spending and cost taxpayers tens of billions each year.

Congress should remove the loophole and require fully detailed CBO cost estimates for all appropriations legislation. The report should cover the different classifications of discretionary spending, such as base defense or non-defense categories, disaster, emergency, program integrity, and other designations.

In addition to detailed account-level reporting, Congress should require the CBO to produce a summary table showing:

1. Total new discretionary budget authority and outlays;
2. Rescissions of budget authority and the resulting changes in outlays;
3. Changes in mandatory programs (CHIMPs) and the resulting changes in outlays;
4. Offsetting receipts and collections;
5. Any other scorekeeping adjustments;
6. The resulting net total discretionary budget authority and outlays,
7. A comparison of the net total discretionary budget authority against the 302 allocations and discretionary spending caps (if applicable); and
8. Appropriated entitlements, direct spending, and the costs of any authorizing provisions.

The CBO's Commitment to Transparency is a Useful First Step

CBO Director Phill Swagel's commitment to transparency is commendable. Under his leadership, the CBO has implemented important reforms to increase transparency and make more information available to Congress.

It has been nearly nine years since the CBO first promised the House Budget Committee that it would share its analysis of appropriations bills with all Members of Congress. Following through on that promise is an important step toward transparency about appropriations bills.

The CBO was established in 1974 to provide lawmakers with better information during the legislative process. Accurate, timely information is essential.

The CBO needs to provide that information before Congress casts its votes, not after it is too late.