

Earmark excess: An opportunity for reform

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Complaining about earmarks is a staple of U.S. politics. The specific projects that members of Congress tack on to spending bills have long sparked public outrage. For most Americans, the idea of building a \$320 million bridge from Ketchikan, Alaska (population 7,368), to the island of Gravina (population 50)—the so-called Bridge to Nowhere—is laughable. So is the idea of spending money to study the DNA of grizzly bears. And who besides residents of South Carolina wants the federal government to fund a convention center in Myrtle Beach?

But many of the complaints about earmarks are disingenuous, and some are overblown. Disingenuous, because politicians who complain are usually seeking earmarks of their own. After having elevated earmark spending to an art form for a decade, the Republicans last month objected that the Democrats' spending bill was loaded with earmarks—even though 40 percent of them were sponsored by Republicans themselves.

Overblown, because there is nothing in itself wrong with members of Congress specifying priorities for spending. When billions of dollars are appropriated for, say, highways, someone has to decide which roads will be widened, which interchanges built, which bike paths created. And who better to make such decisions than the representatives of the states and districts affected? If the members of Congress don't register their priorities, then spending decisions will be left to officials in the executive branch. And decisions made in basement offices of the Transportation Department are not necessarily any wiser, or less subject to crass political calculation, than those made in congressional committee rooms.

The problem is not earmarks but the way they are hidden from public scrutiny and used to fund pet projects and curry favor with particular contractors (and political supporters). That's why the Obama administration wants earmark requests to be made public for 20 days before coming up for approval—that way they can be examined by constituents and reviewed by government agencies. Obama also would eliminate no-bid contracts from earmarks. And he wants the ability to exercise a presidential veto against earmarks without having to veto an entire spending bill.

A further reform, proposed by veteran Congress watcher Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, would involve members of Congress setting up review boards, made up of business, labor and academic leaders in the various states and districts, to evaluate the social and economic needs of their regions and to list spending needs. These boards would serve as watchdogs if their elected representatives reject the boards' priorities in favor of their pet projects.

The excesses of earmarking are well known. The path to reform is clear. If politicians really want to do more than complain, they have a golden opportunity.