Fix appropriations, fix the government

By Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.), Opinion Contributor — 01/25/19 10:25 AM EST 36
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Everyone knows budgeting isn’t the most interesting conversation starter. Friends and co-workers are unlikely to discuss their money-delegating procedures, and even the latest and greatest budget won’t grab headlines – that is, until part of the U.S. government is shut down over funding disagreements. Current government closures have already made history as the longest on record, affecting 800,000 federal workers with no end in sight.

What got us here?

The answer first requires some background; however, to the chagrin of some of our tech-centric freshman members, I can’t fit the explanation into 280 characters or a catchy meme. So here I am, resorting to an old technique of placing this essay on the opposite side of the editorials page.

Here’s how budgeting is supposed to work: first, the administration sends its proposed budget to Congress. Congress considers the administration’s requests, and the House and Senate Budget Committees then craft the “real” budget, the congressional budget. This budget is not the actual taxes and expenditures of the federal government, but it establishes the floor for revenue and the ceiling for expenditures – think of it as a framework for the fiscal activity of the federal government. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) then analyzes and scores the budget.

By early spring, the House and Senate adopt a budget. This allows the Ways and Means Committee to work on tax policy to meet the revenue floor, while the Appropriations Committee drafts 12 appropriations bills to fund the military and other government agencies that aren’t covered by mandatory spending. Since the fiscal year ends Sept. 30, the House and Senate pass 12 appropriations bills and send them to the president’s desk, so the government keeps operating.

If that sounds foreign to you, it should. Here’s what really happens. Regardless of the administration’s party affiliation, it sends an extreme budget to Congress to use as a messaging tool. In turn, Congress then crafts its own unreasonable and illogical budget to message. A surefire way to get a budget passed is if unified government leadership is in place and uses budget reconciliation (which has nothing to do with the actual spending bills) to sidestep the 60-vote filibuster rule in the Senate and pass major legislation along party lines. Using budget reconciliation, Democrats have recently been successful in passing health care and Republicans in passing tax reform -- both huge pieces of legislation, both right down party lines, and both creating divisions in Congress and the country at large.

Remember those 12 original appropriations bills? Occasionally, the House manages to send them to the Senate before the fiscal year deadline. Even with a unified Congress, however, getting action on those bills is next to impossible, because the Senate requires 60 votes to bring them up for debate. Given our current divided government, the chances of Congress funding the
government for next year by Sept. 30 of 2019 are about as good of odds as the Saints winning the Super Bowl this year.

This situation is what landed the country in its current predicament. With the full weight of the federal budget at risk, a shutdown usually results in a continuing resolution, culminating with a massive omnibus bill like the one from March 2018 that “funds” the government but is filled with pork.

Single appropriations bills are usually debated in the open, amended, do not contain policy riders or earmarks, and represent a compromise of the House and Senate. In contrast, omnibus bills are debated behind closed doors, are all-encompassing, and for the most part represent only the wishes of those in the negotiating room. Other members of Congress are told accept the omnibus or be guilty of shutting down the government, hardly what I think our Founders envisioned and the opposite of what President Trump is trying to accomplish. In fact, he committed last March to not sign another omnibus, and the country should be grateful. It’s a hand that needed to be forced.

Virtually every disfunction in the federal government is manifested in Congress’s inability to pass appropriations bills on time. Fix this problem and pass clean appropriations bills individually before Sept. 30, and D.C. will quickly become functional, the country will avoid needless shutdowns, a meaningful budget process can address the national debt, and Congress can exercise its equal and balanced power on behalf of the American citizenry.

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