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House Transparency Rules Reveal that Pork Projects Tilt Heavily Toward Appropriators

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The House Appropriations Committee recently agreed to list all pork projects and their sponsors in the House appropriations bills. For years, lawmakers have maintained that projects are distributed purely on merit, rather than because of political considerations such as campaign contributions and committee assignments. However, the first two appropriations bills—Interior/Environment and Financial Services/General Government—reveal that the amount of pork-barrel spending a community receives is heavily dependent on whether its Representative serves on the House Appropriations Committee.

Interior/Environment Appropriations. Members of House Representatives received 246 pork projects totaling \$131 million in the House Interior/Environment Bill.¹ Even though the 66 members of the Appropriations Committee account for just 15 percent of the total House membership, they received 46 percent of the pork projects (113), and 51 percent of pork dollars (\$66.8 million).

Nine lawmakers received at least four earmarks each. Every one of them is a member of the House Appropriations Committee. The chairman of the subcommittee that wrote the Interior/Environment Bill, Representative Norman Dicks (D-WA), received the most earmarks in that bill—six. Subcommittee Vice-Chairman Jim Moran (D-VA) and Ranking Member Todd Tiahrt (R-KS) followed, with five earmarks each. Four earmarks apiece went to Representative Virgil Goode (R-VA), Nita Lowey (D-NY), Alan Mollohan (D-WV), John Murtha (D-PA), John Olver (D-MA), and Tom Udall (D-NM)—all appropriators.

Financial Services/General Government Appropriations. The distribution of pork in the Financial Services/General Government Appropriations Bill was also tilted toward appropriators, although less so than in the Interior/Environment Bill. Members of the House Representatives received 197 pork projects worth \$41 million. Accounting for only 15 percent of total House membership, appropriators brought home 36 percent (63) of the pork projects and 39 percent (\$15.8 million) of pork dollars.

Four of the six lawmakers who received at least three pork projects serve on the Appropriations Committee: Representatives Ralph Regula (R-OH) and James T. Walsh (R-NY) have four projects each; Representatives Rodney Alexander (R-LA) and Dennis Rehberg (R-MT) collected three projects each. Among non-appropriators, Representative Elijah Cummings (D-MD) received three projects and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) received five.

If lawmakers know best where government grants should be distributed (as appropriators often contend), it is noteworthy that so many recipients of earmarked grants live in the districts of the most powerful members of the House Appropriations Committee.

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Table 1			
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The Distribution of Pork in the House's Interior/Environment Appropriations Bill			
	Members	Projects	Cost
Appropriators	66	113	\$66,782,500
Non-Appropriators	367	133	\$64,580,000

Note: Projects with more than one sponsor are assigned to, and counted once for, each sponsoring Member.

Table 2			
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The Distribution of Pork in the House's Financial Services/General Government Appropriations Bill			
	Members	Projects	Cost
Appropriators	66	63	\$15,788,000
Non-Appropriators	367	114	\$24,879,000

Note: Projects with more than one sponsor are assigned to, and counted once for, each sponsoring Member.

Pork Is Not a Congressional Duty. In the past, Congress created grant programs and either distributed the money to state and local governments by formula or instructed federal agencies to distribute the grants through a merit-based application process. Today, Congress actually determines, within legislation, who will receive government grants by “earmarking” grant money to specific recipients. Earmarks are also known as pork projects.

Lawmakers often assert that distributing pork projects is a central Congressional duty protected by the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution gives Congress almost unlimited power to appropriate, and this includes pork. But mere constitutionality does not make pork-barrel spending good public policy.

While pork projects have long existed, the recent explosion in pork-barrel spending is unprecedented. Between 1996 and 2005, the number of annual pork projects in appropriations bills skyrocketed from 958 to 13,997—at an annual cost of \$27 billion—before dropping by half during last year’s pork moratorium. Additionally, between 1982 and 2005, the number of pork projects in the six-year highway authorization bills surged from 10 to 6,371 (including the infamous “Bridge to Nowhere”). No Congressional tradition exists for

the levels of pork-barrel spending seen in the past few years.

Does Congress Know Best? Lawmakers also defend pork projects by asserting that they know best how to distribute government grants in their districts. In theory, that may be so. In practice, that argument ignores two realities.

First, investigations have linked pork projects to campaign contributions and even bribes. Former Representative Randy “Duke” Cunningham (R-CA) is currently serving an eight-year prison term for accepting bribes in return for pork projects. Additionally, as shown above, the amount of pork a district receives depends heavily on whether its Representative serves on the Appropriations Committee. This suggests that factors other than merit are influencing pork-barrel spending.

Second, lawmakers’ focus on pork raises a larger concern about the role of the federal government. Members of the U.S. Congress—a national legislature that has historically debated war, Americans’ rights, and broad economic policy—have become, in the words of Representative Dan Lungren (R-CA), “mere errand boys for local government and constituents.”²

1. The Sunlight Foundation has published the committee report, which contains project lists, on its website. See House Committee on Appropriations, “Report to Accompany H.R. 2643,” June 21, 2007, at www.sunlightfoundation.com/files/Interior%20earmarks.pdf. Note that this paper focuses on how Congress distributes its own pork, and therefore excludes projects that were also requested by the President. Additionally, projects requested by multiple Members are assigned to all requesting Members.
2. John Fund, “Time for a Time-Out?” *OpinionJournal.com*, September 18, 2006, at www.opinionjournal.com/diary/?id=110008960.

Last year, Congress failed to address the looming tidal wave of Social Security and Medicare spending but did decide that State Street in Madison, Wisconsin, could use some upgrades. Congress did not pass immigration legislation, but it did decide that the public swimming pool in Banning, California, could use another \$500,000 in renovations. Vital national issues go ignored by lawmakers who are instead focused on whether a certain intersection in Westchester County, New York, needs a traffic light.

Tending to such matters is why state and local governments exist. Perhaps Congress does not believe that local governments can handle the job. House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) endorsed congressional pork by asking rhetorically, “Who knows best where to put a bridge or a highway or a red light in their district?”³ Not mayors or city councils, apparently.

True, some earmarked dollars do fund meritorious projects. But if project recipients are as worthy as lawmakers assert, then they should compete favorably for federal grants from the agencies and local governments that traditionally distribute them. Often times, only the projects that cannot compete on merit need lawmakers to step in, rewrite the rules, and carve out a grant for them.

How Pork Expands Government. In addition to misallocating resources and diverting Congress’s attention away from vital national issues, pork increases the size of government. The reasoning is similar to the “broken windows” theory that small crimes such as graffiti create a mindset of social breakdown and disrespect for the law that ultimately leads to more serious crimes. With pork, a few small projects create a mindset of using federal spending to buy popularity, which ultimately leads to massive expansion of the federal government.

Specifically, lawmakers who come to Washington to scale back government quickly get hooked on pork by their senior colleagues, who assert that re-elections are won through the massive campaign contributions and “bring home the bacon” press

releases that pork provides. If pork projects impress voters back home, then logically an expensive farm bill would buy rural votes, and a Medicare drug benefit would buy senior votes. It is no accident that total federal spending has also surged along with pork-barrel spending over the past decade.

Even pork-seeking lawmakers who are otherwise committed to fiscal responsibility surrender their independence to vote against runaway spending. The authors of legislation often incorporate only the pork projects of lawmakers who commit to voting for the entire spending bill (which makes pork a key way for senior lawmakers to influence the votes of their junior colleagues). Consequently, lawmakers vote for massive, wasteful spending bills simply to guarantee a single project in their districts. For example, the notorious, pork-laden 2005 highway bill that included the “Bridge to Nowhere” passed the House by an overwhelming 412 to 8 margin. Only a handful of lawmakers resist earmarks.

In the end, lawmakers’ focus on wasteful and self-serving pork projects makes taxpayers lose faith in Congress’s ability to solve the vital issues of the day. After all, if lawmakers cannot be trusted to spend government grants well, how they can be trusted to reform Social Security and Medicare?

Conclusion. The recent transparency rules, agreed to by House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-WI), have provided a window into how Congress allocates pork projects.⁴ While Congress claims to distribute pork projects by merit, the first two appropriations bills suggest that committee assignments are the more important factor. Eliminating pork projects, and instead allowing federal agencies and local governments to distribute government grants based on merit, would better ensure that grants go to the most worthy recipients.

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3. Robert Novak, “Looking to Fry Pork,” *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2006, p. A17.

4. Brian M. Riedl, “Pork-Barrel Spending: Republicans Win Transparency, but \$23 Billion Slush Fund Remains,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1517, June 20, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/Budget/wm1517.cfm.