

DESPITE RECESSION AND SCANDAL, HOUSE BUDGETS KEEP GROWING

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 832, "The Costly Congress Becomes More Costly," May 30, 1991.)

The House of Representatives spent recent weeks promising to reform its scandal-plagued ways and trying to soften the effects of the recession with a tax bill. But it's back to business as usual as the House prepares to take up a resolution increasing funding for its committees. Unlike the tax bill, which offset tax cuts for some Americans with increases for others, the "Committee Funding Resolution," H.Res. 379, increases funding for nearly every committee, and cuts spending for only one. Overall committee expenses will grow by over \$2.7 million, a 5% jump that is well above the growth of the average American family's budget.

If Representatives are serious about reform, and about helping end the recession, they must reject the increases in committee budgets, cap spending at last year's level, and approve a proposal to begin major reform of Congressional committees.

Congress funds its multi-billion-dollar expenses in a number of deliberately confusing ways. Most spending is contained in an annual appropriation bill. Congressmen's salaries are funded separately by a "permanent appropriation" — an entitlement. Most expenses for Congressional committees are controlled through a third system: a set of annual (for the House) and biennial (Senate) funding resolutions. H.Res. 379 controls funding of House committees for 1992.¹ While a few committees are holding the line on spending, others are growing by as much as 12%, and 18 of the 25 committees covered will grow faster than the rate of inflation (See table on next page). House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski, an Illinois Democrat, requested an 11%, \$500,000 increase for this year. While many in Congress will argue that the sums involved aren't that large in comparison with other government expenses, Rostenkowski had a different view in defending his tax package, which passed last week:

When you're sitting around the kitchen table trying to figure out how to pay your family bills, 800 bucks [over two years] means a lot. It will help make a car payment, or buy a month's groceries, or a new washing machine, or pay on a student loan. These things are not trivial at all to middle-class working people who are being squeezed.

¹ The resolution provides funding only for committees' "investigations and studies." Funding for yet more staff positions is provided by another law.

SELECTED COMMITTEE EXPENSES	1991	1992	INCREASE
Agriculture	\$2,257,937	\$2,359,544	4.5%
Armed Services	2,464,082	2,627,451	6.6
Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs	4,336,240	4,518,362	4.2
District of Columbia	342,035	356,400	4.2
Education and Labor	4,110,649	4,326,063	5.2
Energy and Commerce	6,287,459	6,608,119	5.1
Foreign Affairs	3,840,825	4,052,070	5.5
Government Operations	3,282,875	3,420,756	4.2
House Administration	1,941,450	2,067,644	6.5
Interior and Insular Affairs	2,192,434	2,284,516	4.2
Judiciary	2,430,018	2,575,819	6.0
Merchant Marine and Fisheries	2,322,057	2,426,550	4.5
Post Office and Civil Service	1,910,783	2,015,876	5.5
Public Works and Transportation	2,893,963	3,125,480	8.0
Science, Space and Technology	2,901,410	3,031,973	4.5
Small Business	1,055,000	1,103,530	4.6
Veterans' Affairs	739,451	830,287	12.3
Ways and Means	4,780,000	5,100,260	6.7

Sources: H. Res. 92 (1991) and H. Res. 379 (1992), 102nd Congress.

The funding increase Rostenkowski requested for his committee would provide 1,341 families the \$400 annual break he says is so important, and without the tax increases his bill includes. While Rostenkowski's committee received only a 6.7% increase, that is more than double the increase the average American family got last year.

Some of the explanations for increased funding show how disconnected incumbents have become from the real world. Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Sonny Montgomery, a Mississippi Democrat, defended his request for an almost 20% increase by saying that he wanted to hire two new minority employees. Though most civil rights laws do not apply to Congress, Montgomery had come under fire for employing a nearly exclusively white staff.² Rather than examining his hiring practices, Montgomery decided to meet his quota with two new taxpayer-funded staff positions: whether the new employees were needed and what they would be doing was unclear. While Montgomery did not get his entire request, the 12.3% increase granted his committee is the largest this year.

The request for the second largest increase came from a committee that already has one of the largest budgets and the lowest productivity rates in the House. The Government Operations Committee has reported only one bill during the 102nd Congress, and it has not become law. Yet in February the committee asked for a budget of \$4 million, a 23.4% increase over last year. Though

2 "Ways and Means Asks 10.5% Increase in Its Budget, as Archer Abandons Rostenkowski," *Roll Call*, March 2, 1992, p. 9.

the committee received a more modest 4.2% increase, it is difficult to justify any new spending for a committee that performs so poorly.

Of course, not every committee grows every year. The only committee to receive a budget cut last year in the scandal-rocked House was the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, the "Ethics Committee." This year, the committee will receive no increase in funding, despite claims that it couldn't do a more thorough job of investigating the House Bank scandal due to a lack of resources. It is obvious that the House can afford to do what it chooses, and the cut in Ethics Committee funding is an accurate measure of the House's priorities.

Though his budget is not provided for in H.Res. 379, House Speaker Tom Foley, a Washington Democrat who has presided over two of the biggest scandals in the institution's modern history, increased his office budget by nearly 30%, to \$1,477,000 this year. The House Post Office, home of one of the scandals, grew by over a third. The Sergeant-at-Arms budget, which includes the now infamous House Bank, grew by a comparatively modest 7.3%, still more than double the inflation rate.

These increases are part of a continuing pattern of rapid growth in Congressional budgets. Overall Congressional spending is five times greater than in 1970. Congressional staffs have more than tripled over the last three decades. The number of committees and subcommittees has grown nearly nine-fold since the end of World War II. This growth in committees is a major impetus for a proposal by a bi-partisan group of Representatives and Senators to establish a commission to study Congressional operations. H.Con.Res. 192, introduced by Democrat Representative Lee Hamilton of Indiana and Ohio Republican Bill Gradison, is cosponsored by 169 Representatives and the Senate version is supported by a majority of Senators, but opposition from Speaker Foley and other leaders had prevented action on the bill.

In late March, however, members of the "Gang of Seven," a group of freshmen Republican representatives pushing reform measures in the House, signalled their intention to offer an amendment cutting increased funding for House committees in order to fund the reform effort called for in H.Con.Res. 192. Under this pressure, Foley and House Republican Leader Bob Michel of Illinois announced on March 25 their own plan for a short-term task force on House management, and endorsed H.Con.Res. 192, the Joint Committee proposal, as well. If Foley and Michel are serious in their support for a Joint Committee on Congressional reform, they will support the Gang of Seven's amendment to cut increases in committee spending in order to fund the reform effort. Reducing the increases in committee spending by only 10% would provide more than adequate funding for the study commission.

The House will vote in early April to increase funding by over \$2.7 million for its committees. A vote for H.Res. 379 would be a vote to ignore both the recession and the need for long overdue reform. The House should limit its committees to last year's funding level — as many American families must do in the face of the recession. Part of the savings should be devoted to funding the study commission called for by H.Con.Res. 192.

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