Appropriations Battle Continues; Potential Solution Tied to Iraq Funding

Since the Democrats took control of Congress in January, President Bush has unhesitatingly used his veto pen to remain a relevant policy player in Washington. Notably, he vetoed bills that would have funded stem cell research and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). More recently, he has been using the veto to reject Democratic attempts to boost domestic spending.

There are twelve annual appropriations bills that must pass through Congress and be signed into law. These twelve bills fund the totality of the federal government and are technically supposed to be passed by the time the federal fiscal year commences on October 1st. This year, however, only one of the bills has been enacted – the Defense appropriation – and most of the government has been acting under a continuing funding resolution (CR) since the beginning of October.

Congressional leaders, well aware of the President’s insistence that all spending fall within his desired limits, has only sent one other appropriations bill to the White House for action. That bill, the popular Labor/Health & Human Services/Education bill was promptly vetoed because, according to the White House, “This bill spends too much.” Overall, the disagreement between Congress and the Administration over the eleven remaining bills totals about $22 billion.

Held up by this impasse is funding for several agencies of importance to geographers. In the most recent versions of the Commerce/Justice/Science bill, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is slated to receive an increase of about 10 percent, but that can’t go into effect until the bill has been signed. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) appropriations have also been forestalled.

As was reported in last month’s Washington Monitor, Census Bureau officials had grave concerns that the funding level imposed by the continuing resolutions would prohibit many of the key ramp-up activities for Census 2010. Fortunately, however, the most recent CR included an exemption amount of $1.025 billion for the Bureau’s Periodic Censuses and Programs account “in order to accommodate contracts and activities needed to be undertaken now to stay on schedule for 2010 decennial census and the economic censuses.”

What’s the overall solution? The answer to that vital question is still a bit unclear, but one viable proposal has been floated by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY). Under McConnell’s plan, the Administration would agree to $11 billion in added federal spending – half of the $22 billion in additional funding the Democrats favor – and in turn, the Democratic leadership would agree to pass supplemental Iraq war funding without imposing troop-withdrawal deadlines. As of this writing, Senate Democrats seem amenable to the idea, but House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) had yet to agreed to the solution. It is also unclear whether the White House will agree to the additional domestic spending.

NCLB Likely Stranded Until 2009

The stalemate over reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) will likely continue until after the 44th President of the United States has been inaugurated in January 2009. The budget battle in Congress convinced the bill’s Senate sponsors, Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Michael Enzi (R-WY), to delay bringing it to the floor this fall after a draft bill was released in September by Kennedy’s counterpart in the House, Rep. George Miller (D-CA). It is still possible legislation could be approved by both Houses of Congress and signed by President Bush before the 2008 election takes place, but given the current contentious mood on Capitol Hill, this seems less and less likely.

In the meantime, the AAG encourages its members to continue efforts to reach out to Congress, emphasizing the need for specific geography programs and dedicated funding for those programs in the reauthorization—elements lacking in the current NCLB law.

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