

No. 24 • August 2005

Pork: A Microcosm of the Overspending Problem

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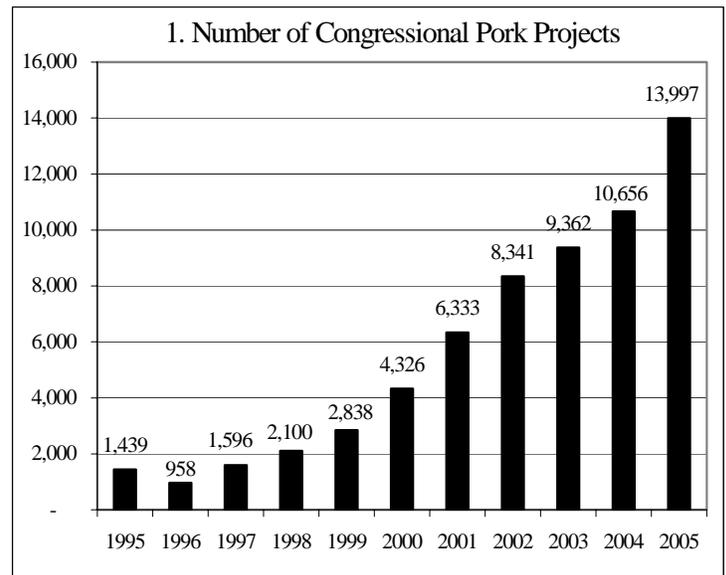
“Pork” spending by Congress has exploded in recent years. The \$286 billion highway bill that passed in July was bloated with 6,371 special projects inserted by members of Congress for their states and districts. Such projects are often of dubious value or for purposes that are the responsibility of local governments and the private sector. Pork is only one type of waste in the budget, but it undermines efforts to restrain federal spending in general.¹

The Republican Pork Explosion

Figure 1 shows that the number of pork projects increased from fewer than 2,000 annually in the mid-1990s to almost 14,000 in 2005, as measured by Citizens Against Government Waste.² Other data indicate that the number of federal “earmarks” increased from 4,155 in 1994 to 15,584 in 2005.³

“Pork” and “earmarks” are similar concepts. Both generally refer to money set aside by legislators for specific projects in their home states—everything from parking lots and bicycle paths to \$50 million for an indoor rainforest in Iowa. The projects are usually inserted into bills by individual members, have not been requested by the president, and skirt normal procedures for competitive bidding or expert review. Thus if the government had \$100 million to spend on bioterrorism research, it might go to laboratories in the districts of important politicians, rather than to labs chosen by federal scientists. Earmarking has soared in most areas of the budget, including defense, education, housing, scientific research, and transportation.⁴

In the past, the Kings of Pork were mainly Democrats such as Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia and former Representatives Tom Bevill of Alabama and Jamie Whitten of Mississippi. Today, the leading pork spenders are Republicans such as Senator Ted Stevens and Representative Don Young of Alaska, and Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran of Mississippi. Republicans promised to cut wasteful spending when they were elected to the majority in 1994. But today they hardly seem embarrassed by the record levels of pork.



Source: Citizens Against Government Waste, www.cagw.org. Fiscal years.

Most Pork Is for Local and Private Activities

As stated in the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, the federal government was designed to have specific limited powers, with most basic government functions left to the states. Yet Congress will dish out \$426 billion on grants to lower levels of government for a myriad of local activities in 2005.⁵ This is a very inefficient method of governing America, as I have discussed elsewhere.⁶

Pork projects, or earmarks, are one aspect of this broader disregard of federalism. Most earmarks fund activities that are properly the responsibility of state and local governments or the private sector. Consider these earmarks from the fiscal 2005 omnibus budget bill:⁷

1. \$350,000 for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland;
2. \$250,000 for the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville;
3. \$150,000 for the Grammy Foundation;

4. \$250,000 for an Alaska statehood celebration;
5. \$25,000 for a mariachi music course in a Nevada school district;
6. \$250,000 for sidewalk repairs in Boca Raton, Florida;
7. \$1.4 million for upgrades at Ted Stevens International Airport in Alaska;
8. \$218,000 to the Port of Brookings Harbor, Oregon, for construction of a seafood processing plant;
9. \$100,000 to the City of Rochester, New York, for a film festival.

Projects 1 to 3 give taxpayer money to groups that should be funding their own activities, especially since many in the music industry are very wealthy. Regarding the Grammys, Representative Jeff Flake (R-AZ) asked: “Why should taxpayers fund an organization comprised of millionaire singers, producers, and executives?”⁸

Projects 4 to 6 are examples of items that state and local governments should fund locally. However, state and local officials are spending more time in Washington asking for handouts. Lobby firms actively solicit officials to hire them to shake the federal money tree for projects that would otherwise be funded locally.

Projects 7 to 9 fund projects that ought to be left to the private sector. I have no idea whether upgrades to an airport in Alaska are needed, but neither does Congress. Only Alaska’s air industry and airport users can gauge that under free market supply and demand. U.S. airports should be privatized, as they have been in many other countries. Seafood plants and film festivals also should be funded by the private interests that they serve.

Pork Erodes Fiscal Responsibility

Republican leaders have allowed an “every man for himself” ethos to permeate Congress. Rather than focusing on national concerns such as security, members have become preoccupied with grabbing money for hometown projects. While politicians express concern about the deficit, their staffers spend most of their time trying to secure pork, and rarely look to find savings in the budget.

The problem starts at the top: Republican leaders have shown no personal restraint on the budget. House Speaker Dennis Hastert is a champion at bringing pork home to Illinois. The *Washington Post* noted that Hastert “makes a habit of helping Illinois-based corporations,” such as Boeing, Caterpillar, and United Airlines.⁹ Hastert’s giveaways have included trying to get United a \$1.6 billion loan guarantee and adding \$250,000 to a defense bill for a candy company in his hometown to study chewing gum.

The lack of principled GOP leadership has a corrosive effect on members who may be willing to support restraint, but who will not put their necks on the line without sacrifice at the top. Why should rank-and-file Republicans restrain themselves when their leader is the porker-in-chief? The problem with pork is not just the particular money wasted, but also “the hidden cost of perpetuating a culture of fiscal irresponsibility. When politicians fund pork projects they sacrifice the authority to seek cuts in any other program,” noted Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK).¹⁰

Conclusion

Pork spending might be brought under control with greater budget transparency. The name of the politician requesting each project should be listed in legislation, and spending request letters sent by members to appropriators should be made available online.

More importantly, the pork explosion highlights the need for Congress to overhaul its budgeting structures to get a grip on the overspending that has created huge deficits. Republican members should insist that party leaders stop undermining restraint by using their positions for parochial gain. They ought to stop supporting leaders who call themselves conservatives just because they favor tax cuts. The real litmus test for conservatism is leadership on spending cuts and a willingness to forgo pork to set a good example for the rest of Congress.

¹ For a thorough analysis of waste in the federal budget, see Chris Edwards, *Downsizing the Federal Government* (Washington: Cato Institute, November 2005).

² See the annual “Pig Books” by CAGW at www.cagw.org.

³ 2005 earmarks from Keith Ashdown, Taxpayers for Common Sense, www.taxpayer.net. 1994 earmarks from John Cochran and Andrew Taylor, “Earmarks the Booming Way to Bring Home the Bacon,” *Congressional Quarterly*, February 7, 2004.

⁴ Cochran and Taylor.

⁵ *Budget of the U.S. Government, FY2006, Analytical Perspectives* (Washington: Government Printing Office, February 2005), p. 131.

⁶ Chris Edwards, “Fiscal Federalism,” *Cato Handbook on Policy* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2005). Online at www.cato.org.

⁷ CAGW Pig Book database available at www.cagw.org.

⁸ U.S. Congress, Office of Jeff Flake, “Congress Funded \$150,000 for Grammy Foundation,” February 14, 2005.

⁹ Jeffrey Birnbaum, “Boeing Has a Powerful Ally With Hastert,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2004, p. A10. See also Dan Morgan, “Hastert Directs Millions to Birthplace,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2005, p. A1.

¹⁰ Tom Coburn, *Breach of Trust: How Washington Turns Outsiders Into Insiders* (Nashville: WND Books, 2003), p. 177.