



What is Appropriations?

This brief provides an overview of the Congressional appropriations process, including how it works and how appropriations can impact social and behavioral science research. See the Further Reading section for additional resources.

Definition: “Appropriations”

“Congressional appropriations” are laws enacted by Congress to provide funding for the federal government. This funding allows federal departments and agencies to obligate resources and make payments.

What are appropriations bills?

The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the “power of the purse,” giving the body the authority to set an annual budget for the federal government through the Congressional appropriations process. The federal budget is comprised of two funding categories: **mandatory** and **discretionary**. Discretionary spending, which represents about one-third of the total federal budget, is allocated by Congress each year through the appropriations bills. Mandatory spending accounts for the rest of the federal budget and is authorized by separate legislation (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) outside the appropriations process.

There are 12 annual appropriations bills, each used as the vehicle for determining funding to various parts of the federal government. To facilitate this work, there are 12 Congressional Appropriations Subcommittees in both the House and Senate that are responsible for crafting their respective bills.

Appropriations bills are often accompanied by a “Committee report” or “report language.” This is a separate report that provides detailed guidance to federal agencies on how to spend the appropriated funds. They often include specific spending instructions, expectations for certain programs, and restrictions on how money can be used. Report language is non-binding but is used to supplement the legally binding text of the appropriations bill and guide implementation of the law. See COSSA’s [What is Report Language?](#) for additional details.

“COSSA 101” is an activity of the Consortium of Social Science Associations. The goal is to provide easy-to-understand information about the inner workings of the federal government to help explain how federal government actions affect the social and behavioral science community.

How does the appropriations process work?

The federal fiscal year (FY) runs from October 1 through September 30. Congress must pass all 12 appropriations bills before the start of the new fiscal year on October 1 or risk a government shutdown.

In many ways, the process for enacting appropriations legislation is similar to non-funding, or “authorizing,” bills: (1) Legislation is drafted and introduced; (2) It is considered and amended by the relevant subcommittee; (3) It advanced to the full Appropriations Committee for consideration; (4) The bill is voted on in the House and Senate; and (5) It is sent to the President for signature or veto. However, there are other steps that are unique to the appropriations process.

For example, before funding can be appropriated to an agency or program, that activity should be “authorized” through separate legislation (note – this is an internal rule, not Constitutionally required). Authorization legislation is used to create or modify government programs and often includes guidelines for how the activity should be funded, known as “**authorization of appropriations.**” However, Congress appropriates funds each year for government activities that are not authorized or for which authorization has expired. Absent authorizing legislation, a government program can continue as long as Congress continues to appropriate funds. See COSSA’s [What is an Authorization Bill?](#) for additional details.

In addition, as part of the annual appropriations process, the *Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974* requires the House and Senate to agree to a **budget resolution**, setting overall spending limits—or “top-line” funding levels—for next year’s budget. It also requires **302(b) allocations** to be set, which provide each appropriations subcommittee with their allotment of the total discretionary budget. This process is important because it creates spending limits that are identical in the House and Senate, thereby simplifying the process. The deadline to adopt a budget resolution is April 15. A budget resolution is not a law and therefore does not go to the President for signature. Instead, it is a framework that is agreed to by both chambers as they head into the appropriations process.

The annual appropriations process generally kicks off with the release of the President’s budget request. Current law states that the President of the United States shall release a budget for the next fiscal year no later than the first Monday in February. The President’s budget includes the Administration’s priorities and funding requests for federal departments,

It is important to remember that the President’s budget request is a largely symbolic policy document outlining the Administration’s priorities for the year ahead. While it is possible that some of the President’s requests will be enacted, Congress has the final say over the appropriation of funds.

agencies, and programs for the upcoming year. However, the President’s budget request is just one input into Congress’s deliberations into how best to fund the government.

After the President releases his budget, the House and Senate start work on a budget resolution and drafting their individual appropriations bills. Both chambers must pass identical bills before they can be sent to the President’s desk for signature or **veto**.

Does the public have a role in the appropriations process?

There are several inputs into the drafting of appropriations. For example, subcommittees typically hold hearings in which they call heads of federal agencies and other government officials to testify about the specifics in the President’s budget request. These are public hearings and are typically livestreamed on the subcommittee’s website. The public—including private companies, universities, subject matter experts, and state and local agencies—can engage in the process through several means. Subcommittees may hold hearings that feature members of the public and/or subject matter experts to hear different perspectives and needs related to federal funding.

In addition, members of the public can have their voices heard by submitting **written testimony**. These are written statements sent to the relevant appropriations subcommittee that are submitted for inclusion in the official committee record. The public can also influence the appropriations process by engaging directly with the offices of their elected representatives through in-person meetings, sending an email, or responding to an **action alert**. All these inputs help to inform the drafting of the appropriations bills. See COSSA’s [At-Home Advocacy Guide](#) for more ways to engage.

What can delay an appropriations bill?

Disputes Over Spending

As noted, the *Budget Act of 1974* requires Congress to adopt a budget resolution that specifies the general parameters for federal funding for the incoming year. However, it has recently become commonplace to bypass the budget resolution process altogether and move directly into committee work. This can cause a myriad of challenges. For example, without a budget resolution in place, House and Senate appropriators may be proceeding with different top-line spending limits in mind, which can cause tension later in the process when differences between the bills need to be reconciled, especially if the House and Senate hold opposing views on federal spending. A budget resolution is intended to avoid this type of conflict by agreeing to the overall budget level *before* the bills are drafted.

Elections

Congressional elections every two years and Presidential elections every four years can significantly impact the timing of the appropriations process. This is especially true when there is a Presidential transition. In transition years, which begin January 1, the President’s

budget request, due in early February, is often delayed, thereby delaying the start of the Congressional appropriations process.

“Earmarks”

Congressionally directed spending, or “earmarks,” are funds included in an appropriations bill for specific projects requested by a Member of Congress, usually directed to their state for a definite purpose (e.g., construction of a bridge, or to support a specific initiative at a local university). Arguments for and against earmarks have been hotly debated for years, sometimes resulting in a ban on the practice in a given year. Some view earmarks as incentives to enact the appropriations bills more quickly while critics say the practice leads to wasteful spending. Regardless, a Member of Congress is more likely to support a bill if it includes funding that they requested.

External Factors

In addition to factors specific to Congress, the appropriations process can be delayed because of external forces, such as international conflicts and war, natural disasters, or a global pandemic. In addition, while funding the federal government each year is arguably the most important task of Congress, it is not their only responsibility. Members of Congress are also responsible for drafting non-funding legislation, serving on committees that provide oversight for various agencies and programs, and engaging with constituents on issues confronting the homefront, to name a few. Each of these factors can take time away from the appropriations process and/or affect negotiations.

What happens if the appropriations process is not completed on time?

Increased partisanship over the last several decades has made it exceedingly rare for Congress to complete the entire appropriations process before the start of the new fiscal year. In fact, the last time Congress passed all 12 appropriations bills on time was in 1996 for the fiscal year 1997 budget. Since then, Congress has relied on **continuing resolutions** (CR) and omnibus spending packages to fund the government.

A continuing resolution (CR) is a temporary measure that maintains government funding at current year levels to allow lawmakers additional time to complete their work on appropriations. CRs must be passed by the House and Senate and signed into law by the President. They contain specific expiration dates by which the appropriations bills must be completed or another CR enacted. CRs can last a few days or several months depending on the cause of the impasse.

If Congress is unable to agree on the terms of a CR, the result is a “lapse in appropriations,” also known as a “government shutdown, like we saw with the record-breaking shutdown in October and November of 2025. Under a shutdown, funding to federal agencies and programs stops and most government workers are furloughed (or sent home) without pay. See COSSA’s [What is a Government Shutdown?](#) for more details.

How do appropriations affect **social and behavioral science research**?

The annual appropriations process directly impacts the amount of federal funding available for research each year. Universities, science advocacy groups like COSSA, patient advocates, and other stakeholders work to secure the highest possible funding level for federal science agencies and programs. Given the many competing interests for federal funding, the research community needs to make its case annually about why research in the social and behavioral sciences is worthy of taxpayer support. You can find additional information on COSSA’s [Policy webpage](#) and [Action Center](#).

Among the 12 annual appropriations bills, several fund federal agencies that award extramural grants for research, evaluation, and data collection and analysis. For example, the Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies (CJS) appropriations bill provides funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the U.S. Census Bureau, and other agencies. The Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (LHHS) appropriations bill provides funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Department of Education, and Department of Labor, among other agencies. Other bills include agencies and programs that support social and behavioral science research, such as the Agriculture appropriations bill, Defense appropriations bill, and Energy and Water appropriations bill.

Key Terms

Action Alert – An action alert, or “call to action,” is a tactic used by advocacy organizations to engage their community in grassroots advocacy. They are often used to ask members of the public to write to their elected officials about a specific bill or policy.

Authorization of Appropriations – An authorization of appropriations is a law that allows for future funding for a specific program or agency. An authorization bill may stipulate the maximum amount allowed for a program, but it does not provide funding. A separate appropriations bill is required to provide the money.

Budget Resolution – A budget resolution is a non-binding framework passed by both the House and Senate that sets overall spending and revenue targets for the federal government for the upcoming fiscal year. While it does not become law, it guides Congress in crafting the individual appropriations bills.

Continuing Resolution (CR) – A continuing resolution is a temporary legislative measure that maintains government funding at current year levels to allow lawmakers additional time to complete their work on appropriations bills. CRs must be passed by the House and Senate and be signed into law by the President. They have specific expiration dates.

Discretionary Spending – Discretionary spending is funding enacted annually through the appropriations process. It is how most federally funded research is supported.

Earmarks – An earmark, also known as Congressional directed spending, is a legislative provision inserted into appropriations legislation directing federal funds to a specific project, program, or organization, usually at the request of an individual Member of Congress.

Mandatory Spending – Mandatory spending provides funds for programs that are required by law, such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and interest on federal loans; it accounts for two-thirds of the federal government’s total spending. Mandatory spending is not a part of the appropriations process and therefore does not need to be approved by Congress each year.

Omnibus – An omnibus appropriations bill is a legislative package containing more than one appropriations bill. It is a vehicle for passing multiple bills at once and is typically used when time is running out to enact appropriations legislation.

Report Language – Report language provides detailed guidance to federal agencies on how to spend appropriated funds. It can include specific spending instructions, expectations for certain programs, and restrictions on how money can be used. Report language is non-binding but is used to supplement the legally binding text of the appropriations bill and guide implementation of the law.

Veto – Veto is a constitutionally mandated, legal power afforded to the President of the United States in which they can unilaterally stop a law from being enacted by Congress, including appropriations bills. The President’s veto can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote by the House and Senate.

Written Testimony – During the appropriations process, any member of the public can submit written testimony to Appropriation subcommittees; the statements become part of the committee record. This form of testimony includes a specific “ask” for the subcommittee to consider while drafting their appropriations bills and may include data, examples, and personal anecdotes to support the “ask.”

302(b) Allocations – 302(b) allocations are part of the budget resolution process that set total discretionary spending levels for each appropriations subcommittee.

Further Reading

The Appropriations Process: A Brief Overview (R47106), Congressional Research Service, May 17, 2023

Authorizations and the Appropriations Process (R46497), Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2023

Understanding the Content of an Appropriations Bill (IG10056), Congressional Research Service, June 12, 2024

Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974:

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/house-bill/7130>

Senate Appropriations Committee Website: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/>

House Appropriations Committee Website: <https://appropriations.house.gov/>

White House Office of Management and Budget Website:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/>

COSSA Action Center: <https://cossa.org/action-center/take-action/>

Have a federal government topic you would like explained by COSSA 101?

Contact us at kshelstad@cossa.org.