MANDATORY VS. DISCRETIONARY SPENDING

The Appropriations Committee deals with discretionary spending, the spending which requires Congress to proactively appropriate it each year. The other kind of federal spending is mandatory spending—the programs that are on autopilot and which do not require annual appropriations, including Social Security and Medicare. Mandatory spending by far has the bigger portion of the two in terms of total outlays; and in the battle to get our long-term debt under control, the true challenge is fixing mandatory spending. This is a critical task but is a topic for another day. Despite the fact that the Appropriations Committee oversees a portion of the budget that is getting smaller and smaller as mandatory spending grows, the committee plays a critical role in providing oversight of the president’s executive branch agencies.

CONTINUING RESOLUTIONS AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

For several years now, the gridlock in Washington has forced Congress to pass short-term funding measures known as continuing resolutions. These resolutions simply fund the government at the previous year’s level, with little or no changes to how the money can be spent. Some view these continuing resolutions as a useful tool for preventing increases in spending—the thought being that if we are maintaining spending at last year’s level, at least it is not going up. As a fiscal conservative, I empathize with this view, but it overlooks a major downside to static budgets. With no realistic threat of a change in funding for federal agencies, the President and his agency heads have little reason to feel accountable to Congress. Leaders of both parties in Congress should be concerned to see the institution itself lose relevance relative to the executive branch.

This is where the Appropriations Committee comes into play. The power of the purse is Congress’ most potent tool for oversight of federal agencies. The unique clout of appropriations bills comes partly through the fact that Congress must pass them each year. Members of Congress propose thousands of bills each year—nearly 7,000 already this Congress—but the appropriations bills are among the few considered as must-pass bills. In other words, a Republican can propose a bill to severely curtail the power of the Internal Revenue Service (and many have), but the head of the IRS likely does not give it a second thought. He knows the bill’s chances of passage are next to nothing. On the other hand, if the appropriations bill which funds the IRS contains those same restrictions, then the IRS chief will certainly sit up in his chair and pay attention. He knows the likelihood of passage is significantly higher.

Herein lies the problem with passing continuing resolutions in lieu of the full appropriations process. When we pass continuing resolutions year after year, that means Congress cannot credibly threaten federal agencies with decreased funding or restrictions on how they use the money. When they know there are probably no consequences, agency heads have little reason to pick up the phone when members of Congress call. They know that under the continuing resolution, their funding cannot be decreased or restricted. It is an open invitation for the types of abuse we have seen in the past several years at the IRS, the Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency, the General Services Administration, the Department of Energy, and other agencies.

APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

The good news is that we now have a budget in place and thus the framework for passing appropriations bills that change the status quo. The appropriations process is supposed to begin with the President submitting his budget to Congress no later than the first Monday in February, but since the President has continued his habit of submitting the budget a month late, we did not wait. The 12 subcommittees of the House Appropriations Committee began holding hearings at the end of February with the agency heads.
over which they have jurisdiction. These hearings will continue throughout
the spring. I sit on three subcommittees, including the Subcommittee on
the Interior and Environment. I look forward to frank discussions with
Secretary Sally Jewell about energy production on federal lands, the ongoing
challenges created by the Endangered Species Act, and the looming prospect
of more monument designations, among other topics. Likewise our hearing
with EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy will focus on the EPA’s war on
hydraulic fracturing, its decision to enact “cap & trade” policies through
regulatory fiat, and the agency’s attempts to expand its jurisdiction under
the Clean Water Act. With the prospect of changes to their funding, I am
hopeful these agencies will pay closer attention than they have in recent
years.

CONCLUSION

I recognize that with the Senate still controlled by Democrats, I will not get
everything I want. So while I will not commit to supporting any of the
appropriations bills until I see the final product, I am confident the process
itself will have a positive impact on Congress’s institutional role in our
system. I look forward to a full appropriations process this year, one that
will force each federal agency and program to justify its existence or risk
its funding.