



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on May 9, 2021

Vulnerable Democrats Taking Advantage of Pork-barrel Spending

On March 17, Congress [voted](#) to bring back earmarks — better known as [pork-barrel spending](#), or special-interest spending championed by certain members of Congress and funded by the federal budget — rebranding them as Community Project Funding (CPF). Such spending has been banned for the last decade and has been long [associated](#) with financial abuse and corruption and accompanied by high-profile [scandals](#). Remarkably, even President Barack Obama, in his 2011 State of the Union [speech](#), said he would veto any bill containing earmarks, saying, “The American people deserve to know that special interests aren’t larding up legislation with pet projects, both parties in Congress should know this: If a bill comes to my desk with earmarks inside, I will veto it.”



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House Democrats brought back the reinvented version of the earmarks process, but not without [help](#) from Republicans.

As reported by *Forbes*, the Democratic majority in the U.S. House of Representatives [will allow](#) up to \$13 billion in earmarks on House appropriations bills, 10 per member, for a total of up to 4,350 earmarks for fiscal year 2022.

Even though some experts, such as those from the Brookings Institution, [argue](#) that earmarks are meant to respond to constituents’ concerns and needs, a brief look at the earmark projects reveals that many of them are simply [wasteful](#), not to mention that the practice itself is inherently corrupt.

While both parties plan to make use of earmarks, vulnerable House Democrats appear to be looking for the most political benefit. Since the House of Representatives now provides [an online link](#) to details about the hundreds of projects for which members are requesting federal funding, earmarks have become easier to track.

So far, nearly every member of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s thin majority has filed a request for an earmark (221), while 106 Republicans — half of the House GOP contingent — have done likewise. Of the [57 House Democrats](#) considered most at risk of losing their seats in the upcoming midterm elections next year, 56 have filed requests for earmarks with the House Appropriations Committee, with total cost of \$1.1 billion, or \$20.4 million per representative. This is much more than the cost of projects for non-vulnerable Democrats, who requested a total of \$2.1 billion, or \$12.7 million per person. Altogether, Democrats want \$3.2 billion, while Republicans asked for \$2.7 billion, or \$25 million per person.



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Openbooks.com analyzed the representatives' websites, where they were required to post their appropriation and infrastructure earmarks, and has found even more requests — amounting to \$9.6 billion worth of projects, with Democrats requesting earmarks worth \$4.94 billion and Republicans not far behind, wanting \$4.7 billion in spending. This discrepancy might be due to the fact that the official House Appropriations Committee website, because it gathers information about earmark requests from congressmen's individual websites, is not updated in a timely manner. Either way, a trend is visible: Vulnerable Democrats plan to outspend their less-vulnerable colleagues.

Earmark requests are popular because they give congressmen something to show their constituents. While most legislation in Washington does not appear to directly affect local communities, earmarks for specific projects give the impression that federal representatives are “delivering” for their voters.

“Earmarks could literally alter the outcome of the 2022 election, because freshmen or junior members who otherwise cannot pass legislation or add budget riders have the chance to secure multiple, multimillion-dollar projects,” [said](#) Colin Strother, a Texas-based Democratic consultant.

[For instance](#), Representative Cindy Axne, the only incumbent Democrat to secure reelection in Iowa last year, requested \$10 million in earmarks. In 2020, Axne retained her House seat by less than one percentage point even as former President Trump carried the district against Biden.

Former U.S. Senator Dr. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) described earmarks as the “currency of corruption” in Congress. Every project is an opportunity for congressional leadership to bribe a member with a project for their vote. Also, it appears that congressmen may turn federal money into their own political campaign fund, without any concern for the skyrocketing federal deficit.

When Ronald Reagan vetoed a spending bill in 1987 that was stuffed with earmarks, he [quoted](#) the second president of the United States and Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, who warned that empowering Congress to spend federal monies on local projects and interests would spark “a scene of scramble among the members [for] who can get the most money wasted in their State, and they will always get most who are meanest.”

Thanks to the Democrats and some of the Republicans, bacon is now back on the congressional menu, and you're paying.



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