

insights

Community Project Funding (Earmarks)

Congressionally-directed spending that benefits a specific member of Congress's district or state.

Parasite

The Constitution expressly grants Congress the “[power of the purse](#),” the authority to levy taxes and spend money. Out of this responsibility rose the practice of congressionally-directed spending, or money that is specifically allocated to an entity or initiative in a member of Congress's state or district, more commonly known as [earmarks](#).

Starting in the 1990s, members of Congress began using earmarks more frequently, though they were not officially codified in House and Senate rules until 2007. Earmarks have long been a target of fiscal hawks, whose simmering frustration reached a boiling point in 2005 with the infamous “[Bridge to Nowhere](#),” when a small Alaskan town received a \$223 million earmark for a bridge that was ultimately never built. This event became symbolic of reckless spending, and when Republicans took control of the House in 2011, they banned earmarks entirely.

Moonlight

[Opponents](#) of earmarks say the ban has limited “pork-barrel spending,” or money that benefits certain interest groups or lawmakers' personal interests, and has also reduced government waste. [Proponents](#) say earmarks are an important part of retaining Congress's constitutional spending powers and avoid ceding funding decisions to faceless bureaucrats within the Executive Branch. They also argue earmarks helped build bipartisan consensus by offering members an incentive to cooperate on each other's legislation, or to put it more plainly, earmarks keep the legislative process moving.

The Shape of Water

After ten years, earmark advocates finally have a chance to prove that earmarks can effectively foster bipartisan cooperation on major initiatives. Democrats [reinstated](#) earmarks at the end of February, now rebranded as “Community Project Funding.” Democrats have structured what they hope will be a limited, transparent process that constrains funding to public and nonprofit organizations and prohibits entities to which a member has financial ties from receiving funding.

In March, House Republicans voted to repeal their caucus's ban on earmarks, to the dismay of some conservatives. Some Republican Senators are also opposed, though Appropriations Committee Ranking Member Richard Shelby (R-AL) has signaled an openness to earmarks, meaning they will likely return in some form to the Senate as well. But whether community project funds have the same consensus-building power that they once did in this new and increasingly polarized legislative environment remains to be seen.

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