

Budget procrastinators blame politics

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When the fiscal year ends at midnight Sunday, Congress will have missed the deadline for every federal spending bill, something Democrats used to repeatedly rip Republicans for.

The federal government will keep humming along at the previous year's spending levels, though, thanks to the congressional innovation known as the continuing resolution, a budgetary maneuver that buys Congress time to work out its appropriations bills when it misses the fiscal deadline.

But the perennial delay, even with a change in power on Capitol Hill, suggests the appropriations process is either broken or severely hobbled, as neither party seems able to get the basic work of funding the federal government done on time.

Outside of blaming the other party for filibustering — or just plain incompetence, as Democrats and Republicans have done in recent years — lawmakers and budget experts believe there are a couple fundamental reasons for the missed deadline.

First, spending bills don't garner great headlines. And both parties in recent years have chosen to focus on base-pleasing measures, particularly on the Senate floor, instead of loading the schedule with actual spending bills.

Second, the appropriations bills have become proxies for much larger policy battles as lawmakers insert provisions dealing with abortion, stem cells or the war in Iraq, making them much more difficult to negotiate in a closely divided Congress.

"It's not the process that's to blame but the polarization that's taken place," said Scott Lilly, a fellow at the liberal Center for American Progress and former appropriations staff director who spent 31 years working for Democrats in Congress. "There are so many issues that are touched by appropriations."

Last year, then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), took heat from Democrats because he scheduled action on bills that were politically important to the GOP in an election year, including a flag-burning amendment and a gay marriage measure, instead of quickly disposing of spending bills.

This year, the Democratic-run Senate has spent two weeks on the defense authorization bill, much of it debating doomed Iraq amendments, as the clock ticked away on the fiscal year.

Appropriations "will always be pushed aside for more politically expedient bills," said

Brian M. Riedl, a budget analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation. “Congress is more focused on political votes. ... Just like the Republicans [last year], the Democrats are doing bills that please their base.”

As a result of the delays, the appropriations bills this year will again be balled up into omnibus bills crafted behind the scenes some time in November, or even December, when lawmakers are more interested in getting home for the holidays than pouring over earmarks and spending line items.

To be sure, Democrats offer a stout defense of their tardy appropriations bills, pointing out that they had to spend the first month of 2007 doing mop-up duty completing the previous year’s spending bills that Republicans were unable to pass.

Last December, the incoming appropriations chairmen, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) and Rep. Dave Obey (D-Wis.), decried the Republican appropriators for a “record of dismal failure for the American people.”

Democrats are also dealing with divided government, unlike their Republican predecessors over the past six years.

President Bush has threatened to veto nine of the 12 spending bills, with Republicans rallying the votes to sustain any spending bill vetoes.

And Democrats don’t have the votes to override those vetoes, so they’ll have to eventually compromise.

“The president criticizes Democrats while conveniently ignoring Republicans’ six-year record of routine failure to pass appropriations bills before the start of the fiscal year — when they had complete control of Washington,” House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) said in a statement Wednesday.

House Democrats are also quick to point out that it’s not their chamber that’s the problem. The House passed all 12 spending bills this year, so their tactic is to blame the Senate and the president.

“Hey, every one of these bills passed the House. ... The leadership in the Senate is all appropriators,” said Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.), the chairman of the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee. “It’s very frustrating. ... We can’t control the other body.”

That “other body” is to take up the continuing resolution on Friday — the House overwhelmingly approved it Wednesday — and the measure will give Congress until Nov. 16 to fight its way through the delayed spending bills.