Federal Budget & Appropriations

Follow the Money: How Congress Funds Our Government

The Through Line: Budget, Appropriations & Reproductive Justice

Reproductive justice (RJ) depends on having tangible resources that support and uplift RJ, and the federal budget decides whether reproductive justice friendly programs are accessible. Through appropriations, Congress writes yearly spending bills that fund the programs millions rely on, including: birth control, sex ed, public health research, student aid, and housing. Congress can add helpful or harmful policies to appropriations bills. Knowing how the process works, can help you be an even more effective advocate.

Congress & the Power of the Purse:

The Constitution (Article I, Section 9) says federal money cannot be spent unless Congress approves it by law.[1] When a President freezes or cancels money Congress already approved, it nullifies a Congressional agreement between lawmakers and the people they represent. We cannot let this go unchallenged and we must use our collective power to advocate for the priorities we want to see reflected in the budget.

The Basics:

- **The federal year starts October 1:** The government's "fiscal year" (FY) runs from October 1 to September 30 and is named for the year it ends in (e.g. Fiscal Year 2027 begins on October 1, 2026).
- **There are two kinds of spending:** Mandatory spending runs on autopilot under laws already in place, like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Discretionary spending is money Congress must approve every year through a process called appropriations.[3] Most budget fights happen here because every year requires a fresh vote. Each bill is a new chance to grow, cut, or zero out programs, or to attach riders, which are policies that can expand or restrict how the funds are used.

  *For example, URGE tracks the **Hyde Amendment,** which is renewed every year and blocks federal Medicaid from covering abortion except in cases of rape, incest, or when the pregnant person's life is at risk.*[2]

How the Process is Supposed to Work:

1. **President's Budget Request (February to April):** The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) publishes it each year. It's legally due in early February but usually arrives February to April or later in a new President's first year. It contains the President's priorities but is not law.[4]
2. **Congress's Blueprint (Spring):** Congress can pass a "budget resolution" that sets its overall spending limits. The President doesn't sign it. It can also instruct specific committees to change spending or taxes, which unlocks a fast-track tool called reconciliation.[4]
3. **Drafting Twelve Spending Bills (Spring - Summer):** The House and Senate Appropriations Committees each split into 12 subcommittees, and each one writes its own bill. Subcommittees hold hearings where agency leaders defend their requests. Then each bill is "marked up," meaning members debate and vote on changes before the full committee sends it to the floor in their respective chambers.[4]
4. **Both chambers vote**: The House needs a simple majority (usually 218 votes). The Senate usually needs 60 votes, so both parties have to make a deal as there is a narrow majority in both chambers.[5]
5. **The President signs by October 1**

Reality check: *In nearly 50 years, Congress has passed all of its spending bills on time only four times. The last time was in 1996.[6] That's why the "money moves" below matter so much.*

Money Moves to Watch

When Congress can't agree to follow the process of appropriations, the following procedures decide what gets funded and what gets cut.

Tactic	What it is	Why it matters to URGE
Continuing Resolution (CR)	A temporary patch that keeps the government funded, usually at last year's levels. It can last a few days or a whole year.[7]	Programs are frozen in place. They can't grow or start anything new, and every deadline sets up another standoff.
Shutdown	If no spending bill or CR passes by the deadline, the money runs out. Many federal workers are sent home. "Essential" workers keep working without pay until it ends.[8]	Services get delayed or stop. The fall 2025 shutdown lasted 43 days, the longest full shutdown in U.S. history.[9]
Omnibus / Minibus	An omnibus packs most or all of the 12 bills into one giant bill. A minibus packs a few.	These huge bills move fast, with little time to read them. That makes it easy to slip in harmful policies.
Rider	A policy rule attached to a spending bill. Riders often have nothing to do with money.	The Hyde Amendment is a rider, which means every budget is a chance to end it.[2]

Tactic	What it is	Why it matters to URGE
Reconciliation	A fast-track process for bills that change taxes, mandatory spending, or the debt limit. It needs only a simple majority (51 votes) in the Senate, so the filibuster doesn't apply. Everything in it has to be mainly about money.[10,11]	In July 2025, Congress used it to cut federal Medicaid spending by an estimated $911 billion over 10 years. That is projected to leave 10 million people uninsured.[12] The same law blocked Planned Parenthood from Medicaid payments for one year.[13]
Rescission	The President asks Congress to cancel money it already approved. The money can be frozen for up to 45 days, and Congress needs only a simple majority in both chambers to approve. If Congress doesn't act, the money must be released.[5,14]	In July 2025, Congress approved about $9 billion in rescissions, cutting public broadcasting and foreign aid. It was the first approved rescission request in decades.[15]
Pocket Rescission	A rescission request sent so close to September 30 that the money expires before Congress can vote.[16]	The Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congress's watchdog, says this is illegal.1 Still, in 2025 the Supreme Court let the White House hold back about $4 billion in foreign aid this way.[17]

URGE & Tracking Money Moves

URGE follows the money moves that shape reproductive justice all year, including:

- **The Labor-Health and Human Services-Education bill** funds Title X which funds contraceptive access and preventative health services, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, the Centers for Disease Control, and it carries the harmful Hyde Amendment.[2,18]
- **Funding freezes (impoundment):** Agencies sometimes hold back money Congress already approved. In 2025, HHS withheld 22 Title X grants, leaving an estimated 842,000 patients without Title X services until the grants were restored.[20]
- **Coordinated Attacks - Gender-affirming care, LGBTQIA+ health, and DEI:** Attacks come through both Congress and federal agencies. In 2025, a provision banning Medicaid coverage of gender-affirming care was dropped from the reconciliation bill after the Senate parliamentarian ruled it broke reconciliation rules.[21] That same year, NIH canceled hundreds of research grants tied to DEI, LGBTQ+ health, and gender identity,[22] and the Supreme Court let about $783 million in cuts stand while legal challenges continued.[23]

We invite you to join our mailing list to stay informed on the Federal Budget & Appropriations and to engage with phrases of this process.

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[3] What Is a Government Shutdown? Brookings Institution, updated April 30, 2026. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-a-government-shutdown-and-why-are-we-likely-to-have-another-one/

[4] A Brief Overview of the Congressional Budget Process (R46468). Congressional Research Service, updated January 10, 2023. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46468

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