
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

What's the cost of the cuts to Congress?

Press Criticism | By Greg Marx | Politics

January 11, 2011 — You might not have noticed, unless you're a true political junkie, but between [reading a bowdlerized version of the Constitution](#) and preparing for a vote to repeal the "job-killing health care law," (yes, that's from the [official title of the bill](#)), the new GOP-led House of Representatives took official action last week: by a [408-13 margin](#), its members agreed to cut their own office budgets — as well as the budgets of House committees and leadership teams — by at least 5 percent.

[The measure](#) appears to be largely for show — according to its sponsor, Oregon Republican Greg Walden, the projected savings [amount to about \\$35 million in 2011](#), barely a speck against the size of the federal deficit. And with plenty of other news stories to focus on, it may not be surprising that the major press outlets didn't spend much time on this one. The Washington Post offered a [perfunctory write-up](#) on its politics blog. The Wall Street Journal [devoted only slightly more space](#), mostly to recall instances in which lawmakers had put their allowances to questionable use. And The New York Times, which [reported on the proposal two days](#) before it came up for a vote, seems not to have noted its actual passage.

The overall picture, wrote the Sunlight Foundation's Daniel Schuman, "strongly suggests that fewer staff perform policy-related work now than in years past."

But if the scant coverage is understandable, it's also regrettable. Congress may be unpopular, but its work — much of which is done not by elected officials themselves, but by their staff — is important, and it has to be paid for. When budgets are cut, it's worth asking what the specific implications will be, and how they play into long-run trends that shape the ability of "the people's House" to do the people's work.

In this case, in fact, much of that work on long-run trends had already been done. In December, not long after John Boehner, the new Speaker of the House, floated the proposed budget cuts during an interview with 60 Minutes, the Sunlight Foundation's Daniel Schuman posted [an analysis of trends in Congressional staff employment](#) over the past quarter-century. Drawing principally on Vital Statistics on Congress, a biennial almanac compiled by several leading authorities on the legislative branch, Schuman found that House staffing levels had declined by 13 percent between 1979 and 2005.

Another [recent report, by the Congressional Research Service](#), employed a different methodology and found an 11 percent increase in staff over a similar time period. (Congress itself doesn't bother to maintain especially helpful records on employment levels, which means any effort to come up with a tally

consists of some guesswork or fudging.) Both sets of numbers, though, show a long-term decline in committee employees — much of which occurred following the Republican takeover of 1994, when the GOP consolidated committees and slashed staffing levels — and a trend in which individual lawmakers assign a greater share of their staff to district offices, where they spend more time on constituent service than shaping policy.

The overall picture, wrote Schuman, “strongly suggests that fewer staff perform policy-related work now than in years past” — even as the complexity of federal legislation has, by all accounts, increased. The demand for information and policy expertise is filled in part by lobbyists, who outnumber House staffers — a situation that Schuman described as the “privatization of public work.”

So to what extent will the latest move exacerbate these trends? It’s too early to say precisely. Congressmembers’ allowances don’t only pay for staff; they also cover office expenses and mailings to constituents. With a few restrictions — there are upper limits on staff salaries, and individual members

“This isn’t going to gain you anything. It’s just going to make it more difficult to fulfill your responsibilities as you see them.” – Norman Ornstein

have been limited to 18 permanent employees since 1975 — lawmakers can choose how to use those funds. The handful of offices contacted last week by Remapping Debate did not respond to inquiries about how they would accommodate the budget cut, declined to offer specifics, or said decisions were still being made. (Some reporters got answers: Rep. Rick Crawford’s office [told an Arkansas paper](#) he is “more than happy to do his part to reduce the debt” by not giving his employees a raise or bonus for the next two years.)

But it’s clear that some staff support will be lost. At the Appropriations Committee, for example, where new chairman Hal Rogers requested a 9 percent cut, a spokeswoman said last week that the reduction meant the committee would operate with fewer staffers during the new Congress.

And it seems just as clear that this latest move was undertaken without any real analysis either of what previous staff reductions have done to the ability of Congress to perform its work, or of what the consequences of an additional reduction might be.

The measure bears some strong resemblances to other cuts-for-show of recent years. Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and a co-author of *Vital Statistics*, compared last week’s funding cut to Bill Clinton’s move to reduce White House staff during his presidency, or Barack Obama’s proposed two-year pay freeze for federal employees. All of them, he said, were “stupid symbols.”

Politicians who propose such moves to curry favor with voters are unlikely to see electoral benefits, Ornstein said, but will be “stuck with the consequences” of fewer or less well-compensated staff.

“You freeze federal pay — great, you tell me how you’re going to go to recruiting season in Silicon Valley and tell the best and brightest to fight cyberterrorism [when] the best you can offer them is...a low salary held the same for two years,” Ornstein said. “And the same [with the current cuts]. This isn’t going to gain you anything. It’s just going to make it more difficult to fulfill your responsibilities as you see them.”

Contacted last week, Walden’s office did not reply to a request for a response to that criticism. But if the concerns raised by Schuman and Ornstein had been included in the coverage of major outlets, he — and the more than 400 of his colleagues in both parties who voted for the measure — might have had to.

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/whats-cost-cuts-congress>