The federal appropriations process is the means through which Congress distributes discretionary spending—funds whose purpose is not mandated by law and/or tied to formulas. This annual process commences with the president and the executive branch submitting a budget to Congress. Each chamber’s respective budget committee approves a budget resolution, which is then reconciled after passing each full body. The resolution sets a total amount available for spending by each chamber’s appropriations committee. This amount is currently limited by The Budget Control Act of 2011 and several subsequent modifying pieces of legislation, the most recent passing last October. For now, the spending limit for the 2017 fiscal year is $1.07 trillion. Various proposals have been floated to decrease this limit even further. This amount is then divided by each chamber among their 12 respective appropriation subcommittees. For example, for FY2017, the Senate’s Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies has been allocated a total of $161.9 billion for spending. Each subcommittee will hold a hearing and markup their legislation. After the appropriation subcommittees complete their work, each chamber will typically pass some appropriations bills individually, and others will be passed together as either an omnibus or minibus legislation. Subsequent to each chamber passing identical appropriations bills—often requiring a conference between the two bodies to hash-out differences—the president will either sign or veto the bills. Another actor in the process (to varying degrees depending on the environment) is the White House, which will often lobby—or attempt to lobby—to exude some influence on the ultimate legislation.

As appropriation bills progress through the labyrinth that is the legislative process, final spending decisions often look quite different from what was originally proposed. Thus, a program, initiative or particular funding level set forth by the president in, say, the State of the Union speech, can look very different when all is said and done—if it survives at all.

This year’s appropriations process—taking place in the midst of a unique presidential election and with party control of the Senate also up for grabs—can best be described as dysfunctional. In the House of Representatives, newly minted Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) is committed to returning the chamber to “regular order,” which is essentially adherence to the body’s standing rules. This allows for a legislative process that is member-driven as opposed to one that is tightly controlled by leadership operating behind closed doors, as has been the practice in the recent past. However, this injects other challenges with the House’s business now exposed to the whims of members, and the body’s cumbersome size impeding the speed of progress. Recent distractions have included the pursuit of the impeachment of the commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service by GOP members, and raucous, public objection from Democrats after the failure of an amendment prohibiting LGBT discrimination by federal contractors. The contentious and politically neurotic environment that Congress currently finds itself in means that appropriations bills, especially the more contentious ones, will not make it to the House floor.

Overall, few appropriations bills are expected to pass. With the government’s funding expiring in September, Congress’ crisis by deadline operation is poised to continue. It is predicted that if Republicans should win the White House, a continuing resolution funding the government until spring 2017 at the latest would be passed, with a shorter resolution passing if Democrats maintain control of the presidency. Regardless of the results of November’s election, a more accurate and complete picture of the government’s spending will not be known until next year. Stay tuned.