An appropriations bill gives federal agencies legal authority to spend money. Congress may support a program, describe its purpose and authorize it to operate, but the program still needs money before most of its work can be carried out. The appropriations bill supplies that spending authority. It determines how much an agency may use, what period the money covers and sometimes the exact activities for which it may be spent.

The word is commonly confused with “authorization.” An authorization law creates, continues or changes a federal program. An appropriation provides money for the program. Congress can authorize a program for several years while deciding its actual funding one year at a time. A program can therefore be legally authorized but receive less money than authorized—or receive no appropriation at all.

Suppose Congress authorizes a job-training program to operate for five years and states that it may receive up to one billion dollars annually. That amount represents permission, not a guaranteed payment. The appropriations committees could provide the full billion, provide six hundred million or provide nothing. The program’s ability to operate would depend on what Congress actually appropriated. Authorization establishes the program’s legal structure, while appropriation opens the financial door.

Federal money cannot ordinarily be spent simply because an agency believes the spending would be useful. The Constitution gives Congress control over money leaving the Treasury. Agencies must locate legal authority for their spending and follow the conditions Congress placed on it. This control is known as Congress’s power of the purse. It allows elected lawmakers to influence federal policy by funding, limiting or refusing to fund particular activities.

The annual appropriations process mainly controls discretionary spending. Discretionary spending includes most federal agency operations, defense programs, education grants, scientific research, transportation programs, national parks, federal law enforcement and many housing programs. Congress reviews these areas each year and decides how much budget authority to provide. “Discretionary” does not mean unnecessary; it means the funding is handled through annual decisions.

Mandatory spending operates differently. Programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are largely governed by permanent eligibility and benefit laws. When an eligible person qualifies, the payment is produced according to the program’s legal formula. Congress does not normally have to provide a completely new annual appropriation for every Social Security check. Changing this spending generally requires changing the underlying benefit or tax law.

Some mandatory programs still receive money through annual appropriations bills, but the appropriation may be legally required. This is sometimes called appropriated mandatory spending. The spending appears inside an appropriations measure even though Congress has less freedom to alter the amount without changing other laws.

Federal budget categories contain exceptions, which is why one label rarely explains every dollar. The important question is which law creates the obligation and which law supplies the money.

The federal fiscal year begins on October 1 and ends on September 30. Before October 1, Congress is supposed to complete the appropriations measures funding affected agencies for the next fiscal year. The process begins months earlier with agency requests, the president’s budget proposal, congressional hearings and committee work. The deadline is known well in advance. Failure usually comes from political disagreement rather than surprise.

Congress divides regular discretionary funding among twelve appropriations bills. Each bill covers a collection of departments and programs rather than one agency alone. One measure covers defense, while others address areas such as agriculture, energy, homeland security, transportation, financial services and labor-related programs. The House and Senate appropriations committees divide the work among specialized subcommittees. These subcommittees examine agency requests and develop detailed funding recommendations.

The House and Senate may pass different versions of the same appropriations bill. Lawmakers then have to resolve differences and approve identical text. The president can sign the bill or veto it. If the president signs it, the agencies covered by that measure receive spending authority under its terms. If negotiations fail before existing funding expires, those agencies face a funding lapse unless Congress passes temporary legislation.

An appropriation is often described as money, but it is more precisely legal budget authority. Congress may give an agency authority to enter contracts or make financial commitments up to a stated amount. The cash may leave the Treasury later as the contract is performed. Money actually paid during a period is called an outlay. Budget authority and outlays can occur in different fiscal years.

A construction project shows the difference. Congress may provide five hundred million dollars in budget authority for a federal building. The agency can sign contracts based on that authority, but the entire building will not be completed and paid for on the first day. Outlays occur as engineers, construction companies and suppliers complete their work. The appropriation permits the commitment, while the outlay records the payment.

Appropriations can remain available for different lengths of time. A one-year appropriation usually must be obligated during the fiscal year for which it was provided. Multiyear funding may remain available for a stated number of years. No-year funding remains available until the money is spent or Congress takes it back. The length depends on the type of activity and the language inside the law.

Congress may provide detailed instructions limiting an appropriation. A department might receive a large total amount, but the law can reserve particular portions for salaries, equipment, grants or construction. Congress may prohibit money from being used for a specific policy. An agency cannot freely move every dollar between activities merely because they exist inside the same department. The restrictions are part of the law, not suggestions.

Appropriations bills can also contain policy provisions called riders. A rider may prohibit an agency from enforcing a particular regulation or require it to follow a certain procedure. Some riders are closely connected to the spending in the bill, while others are included because the appropriations measure is considered necessary legislation. Lawmakers may use a must-pass funding bill to advance policies that could not pass separately. This turns spending deadlines into leverage.

Earmarks direct money toward specific projects, locations or recipients. A lawmaker may seek funding for a bridge, research facility, water system or community program in the lawmaker’s state or district. Supporters argue that elected representatives understand local needs and should direct public investment. Critics warn that earmarks can reward political allies, avoid fair competition or fund low-priority projects. The quality of an earmark depends on its purpose, transparency and oversight rather than the label alone.

The twelve regular bills are not always enacted separately. Congress may combine several into a smaller package known as a minibus. When many or all appropriations bills are combined into one enormous measure, it is commonly called an omnibus. Combining bills can help leaders complete the process, but the result may contain thousands of pages and enormous amounts of money. Members may receive little time to study the final text before voting.

An omnibus is not automatically wasteful simply because it is large. The federal government performs many functions, and funding them requires detailed instructions. The danger comes when unrelated provisions, hidden favors or poorly examined policies are placed inside legislation that lawmakers feel unable to reject. The size makes public examination difficult. Leaders can use the approaching deadline to force members to accept the package as a whole.

When Congress cannot complete appropriations before existing funding expires, it may pass a continuing resolution. A continuing resolution is the formal name for what is often called a stopgap funding bill. It temporarily continues funding for affected agencies so the government can remain open while negotiations proceed. The stopgap does not solve the larger disagreement. It moves the deadline.

A continuing resolution commonly funds programs near their previous levels and under many of the same conditions. If an agency received one hundred million dollars last year, the stopgap might temporarily provide money at an annual rate based on that amount. The agency receives only enough authority to operate through the stopgap period. If the measure lasts six weeks, the agency does not automatically receive a full year's money on the first day.

The phrase "at an annual rate" can cause confusion. It means the temporary funding is calculated as though the previous amount continued for a full year, but the agency receives authority only for the portion covered by the resolution. A thirty-day stopgap supplies roughly the amount needed for that period, subject to the law's details. Congress is preserving operations rather than finalizing the annual budget. The full-year amount remains unsettled.

A stopgap may last several days, several weeks or several months. A short measure can provide time to finish negotiations that are nearly complete. A longer measure may carry agencies through an election or major political transition. Congress can pass several stopgaps in succession, repeatedly replacing one deadline with another. Agencies may spend much of the year without knowing their final funding.

A "clean" continuing resolution generally continues existing funding without adding major unrelated policy changes. Calling it clean does not mean it contains no details or adjustments. It means leaders are attempting to avoid using the temporary measure for a larger policy fight. Whether a stopgap is truly clean can become disputed when one side considers a provision necessary and the other considers it a rider. Political language often hides disagreements about which conditions count as ordinary.

A continuing resolution may include anomalies. An anomaly is a special adjustment allowing a program to operate differently from the general temporary formula. A newly created program may need funding even though it had no previous-year level to continue. A military project may need permission to begin production, or an agency may face a sudden workload increase. Without an anomaly, the stopgap's general restrictions could prevent necessary action.

Agencies usually dislike long continuing resolutions. Temporary funding makes it difficult to begin new projects, enter long-term contracts and plan hiring. Managers may delay purchases because they do not know whether final funding will increase or decrease. A program can lose months of useful work while waiting for Congress. Temporary funding prevents immediate closure but creates inefficiency.

The Department of Defense is especially critical of extended stopgaps because weapons, maintenance and training operate through long planning cycles. A continuing resolution may prevent the military from starting new programs or increasing production rates. Existing projects continue even when strategic needs have changed. Officials may compress spending into the remaining months after full funding finally arrives. Rushing later can create poor decisions and higher costs.

Scientific research also suffers from unstable funding. A laboratory cannot easily hire specialists or begin a multiyear study when its budget is secure for only a few weeks.

Universities may delay research positions, and grant applicants may wait for decisions. Experiments, medical studies and field projects depend on schedules that do not match congressional conflict. The uncertainty can waste time even when Congress eventually provides the expected amount.

A full-year continuing resolution can fund agencies at temporary-style levels for the entire fiscal year. This avoids a shutdown and ends the immediate uncertainty about whether funding will expire again. It can still prevent agencies from adapting to new priorities because the government remains tied largely to the previous year's structure. Programs that should expand may remain frozen, while programs that should shrink may continue receiving similar funding. A full-year stopgap replaces immediate crisis with inflexibility.

If funding expires without a regular appropriation or continuing resolution, a funding lapse begins. The Antideficiency Act generally prohibits federal agencies from spending or obligating money without legal authority. Affected agencies must stop activities that do not qualify for an exception. This is what produces a partial or broader government shutdown. The shutdown is a legal response to missing spending authority, not simply a decision to lock government buildings.

Not every federal function stops during a shutdown. Activities funded through permanent laws or remaining multiyear money may continue. Work protecting human life or federal property may also continue under legal exceptions. Active-duty military personnel, federal law-enforcement officers, air-traffic controllers and certain medical workers may remain on duty. Continuing to work does not always mean receiving an ordinary paycheck on time.

Employees whose work is temporarily suspended are furloughed. Excepted employees continue performing legally permitted duties even though current appropriations have expired. Federal law now generally provides back pay to both groups after the shutdown ends. That protection prevents permanent loss of salary, but workers may still miss scheduled paychecks and face temporary financial hardship. Contractors do not always receive comparable protection.

Social Security benefits generally continue during a shutdown because they are primarily funded through permanent mandatory authority. However, administrative services can slow if employees handling support functions are affected. Medicare and Medicaid payments may continue, while certain reviews or communications are delayed. Mail delivery normally continues because the Postal Service has a separate financial structure. “Government shutdown” therefore describes uneven disruption rather than the disappearance of the entire federal government.

A shutdown and a debt-ceiling crisis are different. A shutdown occurs when Congress has not provided spending authority for affected programs. A debt-ceiling crisis occurs when the Treasury approaches the legal limit on borrowing needed to pay obligations already created. A continuing resolution can prevent a shutdown without resolving the debt ceiling. Raising the debt ceiling can prevent default without providing annual appropriations.

Stopgap bills are often described as measures that “fund the government,” but they cover only the activities whose funding would otherwise expire. Permanent programs and independently funded operations do not have to be recreated inside every stopgap. The phrase is useful shorthand, but it makes the federal budget appear more unified than it is. Different programs rely on different funding laws and expiration dates. Understanding which authority is expiring reveals what is actually at risk.

Emergency and supplemental appropriations may be enacted outside the regular annual process. Congress uses them for wars, natural disasters, public-health emergencies and unexpected costs. A supplemental bill adds funding after the original appropriation has been approved. It can stand alone or be attached to other legislation. Emergency spending may be necessary, but the urgent label can reduce ordinary budget discipline.

Disaster funding shows why annual planning cannot predict everything. Congress may approve an ordinary budget for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, then face several major hurricanes, fires or floods. The original amount may become inadequate. A supplemental appropriation allows the agency to continue disaster response and recovery. The need should still be documented because urgency does not eliminate the possibility of waste.

Appropriations bills do not necessarily spend every dollar immediately. Agencies may be unable to complete projects, grants may receive fewer qualified applications than expected, and contracts may cost less than planned. Unused budget authority can expire, remain available or be canceled depending on the appropriation. Congress may also rescind authority before it is used. A rescission formally takes back previously approved spending authority.

The president can request rescissions, but the president does not possess a general line-item veto allowing unwanted spending to be erased unilaterally. Congress must ordinarily approve the cancellation. The Supreme Court struck down a federal line-item-veto system that allowed the president to cancel particular spending items after signing a law. Control over appropriations remains divided between Congress and the executive branch. The president executes spending laws but cannot freely rewrite them.

Agencies sometimes have limited transfer and reprogramming authority. A transfer moves money between appropriations accounts when permitted by law. Reprogramming shifts money between activities within an account. Congress may require advance notification or approval from appropriations committees. These tools provide flexibility without giving agencies complete control over congressional decisions.

Appropriations negotiations involve more than arguments about a total number. Two sides may agree on overall spending while disagreeing about how it is distributed. One party may seek more defense funding, while another prioritizes housing, health or environmental programs. Disputes can also involve abortion policy, immigration enforcement, energy regulation and other riders. A small provision can block an enormous package when each side considers it a matter of principle.

The threat of shutdown becomes political leverage because both parties want to avoid public blame. One side may refuse to support a stopgap unless a policy demand is included. The other may insist that funding continue without conditions. Each then claims the opponent is shutting down the government. The legal cause is expired appropriations, but political responsibility depends on the demands, available compromises and control of the House, Senate and presidency.

A stopgap can be responsible when lawmakers need a short period to complete serious negotiations. It becomes evidence of dysfunction when temporary funding replaces the regular process year after year. Repeated stopgaps allow lawmakers to avoid final decisions while agencies absorb the cost of uncertainty. The government may remain open, but it operates less efficiently. Avoiding a shutdown is not the same as completing the budget properly.

An appropriations bill represents a completed decision about spending authority for covered agencies. A stopgap represents a temporary decision to continue much of the existing arrangement. Both are laws, both require passage by Congress and presidential approval or a veto override, and both can contain detailed conditions. Their difference lies in purpose and duration. The regular bill establishes the year’s funding, while the stopgap purchases time because that work remains unfinished.