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Politics Drives a Senate Spending Spree

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By [CARL HULSE](#)

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WASHINGTON, March 17 — The largess demonstrated by the Senate in padding its budget with billions of dollars in additional spending this week showed that lawmakers are no different from many of their constituents: they don't mind pulling out the charge card when money is tight.

Just hours after opening a new line of credit through an increase in the federal debt limit, the Senate splurged on a bevy of popular programs before approving a spending plan that was as much a political document as an economic one, its fine print geared to the coming elections.

Forced to choose between calls for renewed austerity and demands for more money, many Republicans joined Democrats in reaching deeper into the Treasury, leaving the party's push for new fiscal restraint in tatters.

Some of their colleagues said it was an open-and-shut case of nervous politicians ducking a tough spending stance to avoid starring in negative campaign commercials. Republicans in some of this year's tightest races — Conrad Burns of Montana, Mike DeWine of Ohio, [Rick Santorum](#) of Pennsylvania, Jim Talent of Missouri and Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island — all backed the chief budget-busting provision as they endorsed an extra \$7 billion for medical research, education and worker safety.

Lawmakers, analysts and others said the Senate's reluctance to clamp down on spending was a natural result of an approach that fails to recognize a sharply changed reality. In some respects, the administration and Congress act as if the surplus that greeted President Bush when he checked into the White House is still in the bank, rather than recognizing that whatever windfall was available then was eaten up and more by tax cuts.

The reality is that the cuts, plus two wars, new domestic security needs, natural disasters and a big expansion of Medicare have left the government's account badly overdrawn with no prospect of getting it back in balance anytime soon.

The criticisms set out by many Democrats — that no real progress can be made in setting the nation's finances right until Congress proves willing to revisit the tax cuts and that the nation is failing to invest sufficiently in addressing its economic and social ills — do not receive much of a hearing in a Washington where Republicans are in charge.

"I think the critical flaw is the failure to adjust fiscal policy in the face of new circumstances," said Robert L. Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, a bipartisan group that advocates reducing the deficit through spending cuts and tax increases.

Mr. Bixby and others say the Republican-controlled Congress and the Bush administration have shown a near total disregard for fiscal discipline, running up new debt.

"The problem we have had on the budget all along is a lack of adult supervision on the part of the White House," said Bruce Bartlett, an economist and author of a new book critical of Mr. Bush's economic record. "You can't blame members of Congress for looking out for their parochial interests. It is the president's responsibility to look out for the national interest."

With the president's influence on Capitol Hill slipping along with his poll numbers, it is unclear how much authority Mr. Bush could exert over lawmakers regardless. Senate Republicans showed no hesitation about bursting through the spending ceiling he set, adding more than \$16 billion after eliminating some of his cuts.

And while the House, which was considering \$92 billion in emergency war spending and hurricane aid, rejected most efforts to increase that total, lawmakers did buy a few extras, including \$50 million more for peacekeeping in Darfur.

Almost lost in all the budget and spending activity was that House and Senate negotiators continue to try to hammer out an agreement for new tax cuts that could cost an additional \$70 billion over five years.

If Republicans in the Senate were motivated by a political calculation that this was not the time to close the fiscal taps, much less cut more deeply into domestic spending, they risked what some conservatives suggested could be a backlash from the right. Many strategists have warned Republicans that their core conservative supporters are demoralized by what they see as the unchecked growth of government.

John Kasich, a former Republican chairman of the House Budget Committee and devotee of balanced budgets who is now an investment adviser and author, said much of Washington had surrendered to the political impulse to please various voter groups with unbridled spending."

Republican leaders see it a bit differently. They point to nearly \$40 billion in savings from social insurance programs they produced last year, an effort that took a tremendous amount of political effort. And an across-the-board cut shaved about \$8 billion from current agency budgets.

They say they intend to hold spending for most agencies outside of the military and domestic security under this year's tight limits and will try to erase some of the Senate spending additions in negotiations with the House.

To do so, they will have to get around Senator [Arlen Specter](#), Republican of Pennsylvania, who clamored for the extra \$7 billion. Mr. Specter said that spending constraints had cut too deeply into health and education programs and that there was a strong show of support for the money — a majority of Republicans backed it.

Republicans also say they see a proposed line-item veto and new restrictions on pet projects as part of a rehabilitation program to kick their spending habit. While those initiatives may end some suspect practices, most see the savings as chump change in an era of \$350 billion annual deficits and \$9 trillion in total debt.

Serious fiscal worriers believe the only true fix can come from a bipartisan meeting of the minds that would put all federal programs on the table along with consideration of both spending cuts and tax increases.

"I've concluded this job is so big it can only be done if the two parties work together," said Senator Kent Conrad of North Dakota, the senior Democrat on the Budget Committee.

But Mr. Conrad acknowledged that nothing substantive could get done in the short term, with both parties girding for November. As the Senate deliberations show, frugality is not an election-year budget value.

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