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The Congressional Budget Process Timeline

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The Congressional Budget Process Timeline

The Constitution gives Congress the power of the purse, granting the House and Senate power over spending, revenue, and borrowing decisions. The Constitution does not, however, specify how, when, and in what order Congress should make these decisions. Consequently, Congress has created a budget process over time through various statutes, rules, practices, and precedents. These component parts make up a complex process involving multiple decisions and actions that could occur at various points throughout the year. As a result, no single timeline can predict with certainty when the various actions that comprise the congressional budget process will occur. There is, however, a general sequence that the basic steps in the process follow.

The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 (the Budget Act) created a timetable to coordinate decisions on budgetary measures, including the budget resolution, appropriations bills, and any potential reconciliation legislation. While this timetable provides a framework for the steps and sequence of the congressional budget process, the timing of events often varies from year to year.

The annual submission of the President's budget serves as a statement of Administration policy and priorities for the upcoming fiscal year and is typically seen as the beginning of the congressional budget cycle. The President is required to submit a budget by the first Monday in February, but in practice the submission may occur after this date.

The Budget Act provides for the adoption of a budget resolution that serves as an agreement between the House and Senate on a congressional budgetary plan for the upcoming fiscal year. In years when Congress has adopted a budget resolution, it has often been in late spring or early summer, though it has sometimes been later. In some recent years, for example, Congress has adopted budget resolutions even after the initial fiscal year for which it applies has begun. In years when Congress does not adopt a budget resolution, the House and/or Senate may employ alternative legislative tools to establish enforceable budget levels.

In years when Congress adopts a budget resolution with reconciliation instructions, specified committees are instructed to develop legislative language to achieve a budgetary effect in accordance with the budget resolution. The reconciliation process follows a timeline set forth in the budget resolution for that fiscal year and therefore has varied in when it has occurred. Historically, Congress has passed reconciliation legislation at various points during a year, both before and after the initial fiscal year for which the budget resolution applies began.

Discretionary spending comprises roughly one-third of federal spending and is provided through the annual appropriations process. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees are responsible for developing annual appropriations measures, and each committee has 12 subcommittees, each responsible for one of the regular appropriations bills. The appropriations process generally involves action at the subcommittee, full committee, and chamber levels in the House and Senate. Preliminary action on the appropriations process begins shortly after the submission of the President's budget in the late winter or early spring. Subcommittee and full-committee action on appropriations bills generally occurs from spring through the summer, after which appropriations bills may be considered as individual or packaged measures on the floor by the House or Senate from late summer and often into the new fiscal year.

To prevent funding gaps and government shutdowns, Congress can enact continuing appropriations measures (commonly known as continuing resolutions or "CRs"). It is common practice for Congress to enact an initial CR at the end of September and then enact new CRs as needed upon the old one's expiration. Recent practice has often been for Congress to enact an initial CR that lasts until November or December and then extend this period through subsequent CRs until final action on enacting regular appropriations bills occurs at some point between December and May.

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Introduction

The congressional budget process generally involves various actions taken and decisions made over the course of the fiscal year. This could include committee, chamber, and bicameral-level decisions on measures affecting spending or revenues.

The Constitution gives Congress the power of the purse, granting the House and Senate power over spending, revenue, and borrowing decisions. Specifically, Article I of the Constitution grants Congress the power to lay and collect taxes and to borrow money (Article I, Section 8), as well as power over spending decisions. (Article I, Section 9, states: “No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law”). While the Constitution establishes that the power of the purse must be exercised through the lawmaking process, it does not specify how, when, and in what order Congress should make these decisions.

Congress has created a budget process over time through various statutes, rules, practices, and precedents. Together, these component parts make up a complex process involving multiple decisions and actions that could occur at various points during the year. As a consequence, there is no single timeline that can be used to predict with certainty when the various actions that comprise the congressional budget process will occur for any given fiscal year. There is, however, a general sequence that the basic steps in the process follow.

This report provides an overview of the general timing and sequence of the actions that make up the congressional budget process. First, it outlines the timetable for the process set forth in the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 (the Budget Act). Next, it describes how each of the major steps in the process fit into this timeline in practice. The major actions in the congressional budget process that this report covers include the submission of the President’s budget, adoption of the budget resolution, potential consideration of reconciliation legislation, development and consideration of annual appropriations bills, the use of continuing appropriations measures, and the completion of the annual appropriations process for a given fiscal year.¹

The Congressional Budget Act of 1974

The Budget Act lays out the general timing and sequence of events that make up the congressional budget process.² The act created this process to coordinate decisions on budgetary measures, including the budget resolution, appropriations legislation, revenue legislation, and any possible reconciliation legislation.

As part of these coordination efforts, Section 300 of the Budget Act created a timetable (as seen in **Table 1**) for the congressional budget process. This timetable provides a series of target and enabling dates for the consideration and adoption or enactment of budgetary measures prior to the start of a fiscal year on October 1.

¹ For more on the federal budget process, see CRS Report R46240, *Introduction to the Federal Budget Process*, by James V. Saturno.

² Titles I-IX of P.L. 93-344, codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §§601-688.

Table I. Congressional Budget Process Timetable

On or before:	Action to be completed:
First Monday in February	President submits budget.
February 15	Congressional Budget Office submits report (on the economic and budget outlook) to Budget Committees.
Not later than 6 weeks after President submits budget	Committees submit views and estimates to Budget Committees.
April 1	Senate Budget Committee reports concurrent resolution on the budget (budget resolution).
April 15	Congress completes action on concurrent resolution on the budget.
May 15	Annual appropriation bills may be considered in the House.
June 10	House Appropriations Committee reports last annual appropriation bill.
June 15	Congress completes action on reconciliation legislation.
June 30	House completes action on annual appropriation bills.
October 1	Fiscal year begins.

Source: Section 300 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §631.

Although the timetable in Section 300 of the Budget Act reflects the actions that make up the congressional budget process, in practice the timing of events may be influenced by various logistical, political, economic, and other factors. Because most of these actions typically occur over the course of a given fiscal year, however, this timetable does provide a framework for understanding the sequence of the process and how certain actions are related to later action on other steps in the process.

Submission of the President's Budget to Congress

The Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 established a requirement for the President to submit a budget request for the upcoming fiscal year near the beginning of each calendar year.³ The President's budget submission serves as a statement of Administration policy priorities as well as a detailed plan for the allocation of budgetary resources and execution of government activities.⁴ Under current law, the President must submit a consolidated budget to Congress no later than the first Monday in February, although the submission may occur after this date. The submission of the President's budget generally signifies the beginning of congressional consideration of budgetary questions concerning the upcoming fiscal year.

³ Public Law 13, 67th Congress, codified in part at 31 U.S.C. §501.

⁴ For more on the President's budget, see CRS Report R47019, *The Executive Budget Process: An Overview*, by Dominick A. Fiorentino and Taylor N. Riccard.

Adoption of a Budget Resolution

The Budget Act provides for the adoption of a concurrent resolution on the budget (the budget resolution) to set enforceable budgetary parameters and coordinate congressional fiscal decisions for the upcoming fiscal year.⁵ The budget resolution allows Congress to establish a framework within which the House and Senate will consider budgetary legislation, set enforceable spending and revenue levels, outline high-level spending priorities, and, optionally, include instructions that can trigger subsequent reconciliation legislation.⁶ In the context of the congressional budget process timeline, the budget resolution can be an important enabling mechanism for later steps in the process.⁷

The Budget Act sets a target date of April 15 for adoption of the budget resolution, although Congress has typically adopted budget resolutions after this date. Congress has adopted a budget resolution prior to April 15 four times since FY1985, most recently for FY2004. In years when Congress has adopted a budget resolution, it has most often been in late spring or early summer in the months of April through June. In some recent years, however, Congress has adopted budget resolutions with reconciliation instructions after the initial fiscal year for which it applies has begun, doing so for FY2017 (January 13, 2017), FY2018 (October 26, 2017), and FY2021 (February 5, 2021).

Congress is generally prohibited from considering budgetary measures before the adoption of a budget resolution, although the Budget Act does provide a specific exception for the House to begin considering appropriations bills in the absence of one after May 15.⁸ In years when Congress does not adopt a budget resolution, the House and/or Senate may employ alternative legislative measures (referred to collectively as “deeming resolutions”) to establish enforceable budgetary levels, particularly for the annual appropriations process.⁹

Reconciliation Legislation

Reconciliation is an optional process through which Congress can change current law to make revenue, spending, and debt limit levels consistent with the policies and priorities established in the budget resolution. In years when Congress adopts a budget resolution that includes instructions for reconciliation, specified committees are instructed to develop legislative changes to achieve a budgetary effect in accordance with the directives and timeline established in the budget resolution.¹⁰ The resulting legislation is then considered under expedited procedures in the Senate.¹¹

⁵ Section 301 of the Budget Act, codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §632. The Budget Act requires that the budget resolution cover the upcoming fiscal year and at least the subsequent four fiscal years. In current practice, it has been common for the budget resolution to cover the upcoming fiscal year and the subsequent nine fiscal years.

⁶ For more on budget resolutions, see CRS Report RL30297, *Congressional Budget Resolutions: Historical Information*, by Bill Heniff Jr.

⁷ Adoption of the same budget resolution by both chambers is required in order to trigger any enforcement or reconciliation procedures under the Budget Act.

⁸ Section 303 of the Budget Act, codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §634.

⁹ For more on deeming resolutions, see CRS Report R44296, *Deeming Resolutions: Budget Enforcement in the Absence of a Budget Resolution*, by Megan S. Lynch.

¹⁰ Section 310 of the Budget Act, codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §641.

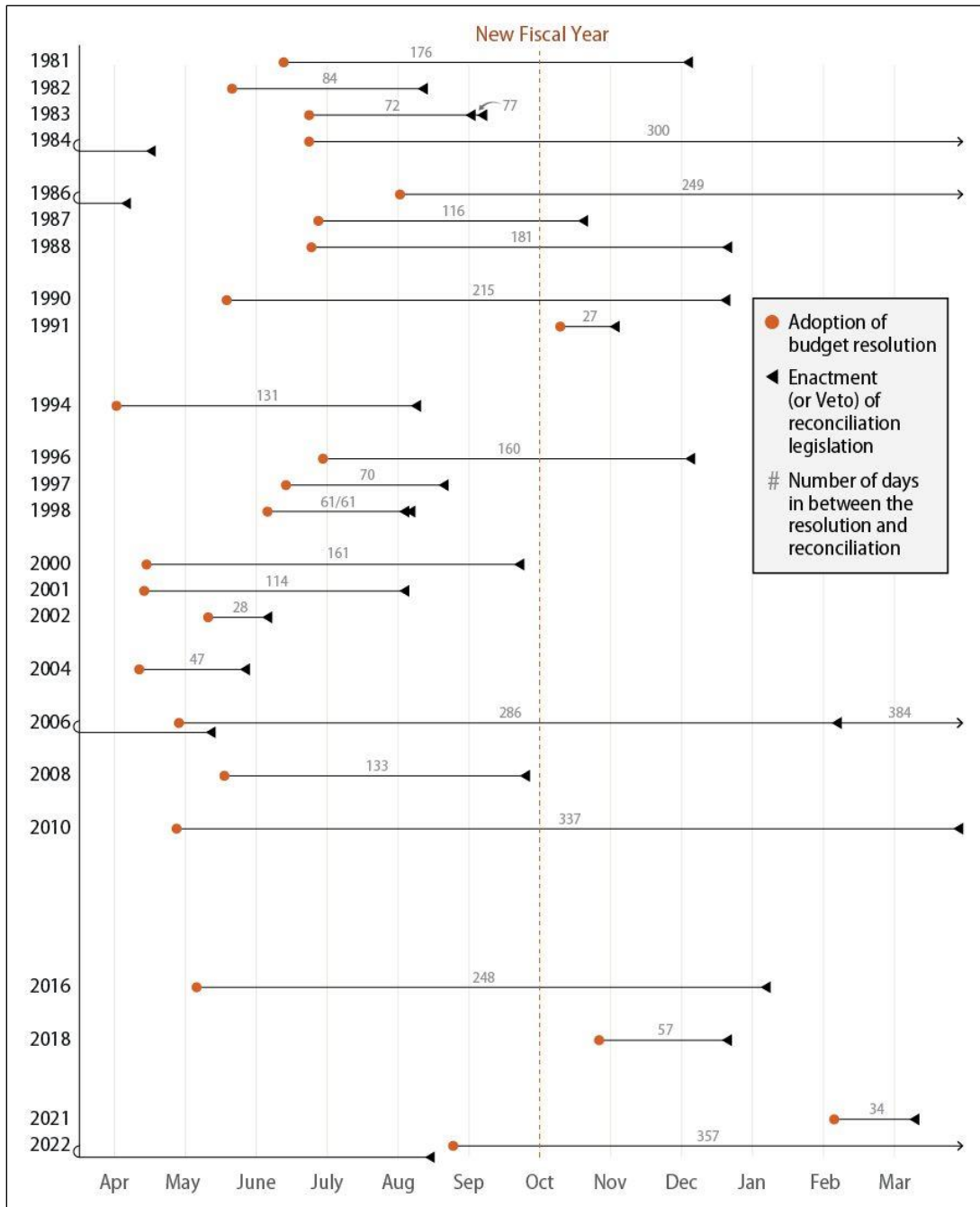
¹¹ For more on the reconciliation process, see CRS Report R44058, *The Budget Reconciliation Process: Stages of Consideration*, by Megan S. Lynch and James V. Saturno.

The Budget Act sets a target date of June 15 for enacting reconciliation legislation. In practice, however, reconciliation follows the timeline established in the budget resolution for that fiscal year. This means that the timeline for reconciliation legislation generally varies in terms of its development, consideration, and passage, as well as the time between the adoption of a budget resolution and passage of reconciliation legislation. Furthermore, the reconciliation process operates separately from the appropriations process, so while they may occur simultaneously, the timing of one generally does not directly affect the timing of the other.

Since the first reconciliation legislation was enacted for FY1981, Congress has passed 27 reconciliation measures and the President has signed 23 into law. Over this period, there has been wide variation in the timing of when Congress has considered such legislation (as shown in **Figure 1**).¹² Congress has passed 12 of the 27 reconciliation measures prior to the start of the initial fiscal year for which the budget resolution applied. Of these, two were passed between May and June, and the other 10 were passed in August or September. Congress passed the remaining 15 reconciliation measures after the initial fiscal year for which the budget resolution applied had already begun. Seven were passed between October and December, and eight were passed in the next calendar year between January and August.

¹² For more on the timing of the reconciliation process, see CRS Report RL30458, *The Budget Reconciliation Process: Timing of Legislative Action*, by Megan S. Lynch.

Figure I. Timing of Budget Resolution Adoption and Enactment (or Veto) of Reconciliation Legislation: FY1981-FY2022



Sources: Information compiled from CRS Report R40480, *Budget Reconciliation Measures Enacted into Law Since 1980*, by Megan S. Lynch; the CRS Appropriations Status Table; and Congress.gov.

Notes: The “number of days in between the resolution and reconciliation” refers to the number of days between Congress adopting a budget resolution and the enactment or veto of reconciliation legislation. The President has vetoed reconciliation legislation four times since FY1981 (FY1996, FY2000, FY2001, and FY2016). Congress has enacted multiple pieces of reconciliation legislation for the same fiscal year three times (FY1983, FY1998, and FY2006), as shown above. Years when Congress enacted reconciliation legislation past April of the new fiscal year (FY1984, FY1986, FY2006, and FY2022) are represented above by wrapping the timeline around the x-axis and should still be read from left to right beginning with the adoption of a budget resolution.

Development and Consideration of Appropriations Bills

Discretionary spending comprises roughly one-third of federal spending and is provided through the annual appropriations process. This process currently consists of the development and consideration of 12 regular appropriations measures, as well as any supplemental appropriations measures that may be needed over the course of a fiscal year. Most of the budget authority enacted through regular appropriations legislation is provided for a single fiscal year and expires at the end of that fiscal year on September 30. This makes October 1 a hard deadline for Congress in enacting regular appropriations for the new fiscal year, as agencies generally cannot obligate money in the absence of appropriations enacted into law.¹³

Like other aspects of the congressional budget process, the timing of appropriations decisions varies from year to year.¹⁴ The House and Senate Appropriations Committees are responsible for developing annual appropriations measures, and each committee currently has 12 identical subcommittees that are each responsible for developing one of the regular appropriations bills.¹⁵ The appropriations process for a given fiscal year typically involves action at the subcommittee, full committee, chamber floor, and bicameral levels.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees typically begin preliminary action on annual appropriations measures in the late winter or early spring, shortly after the submission of the President's budget. This commonly takes the form of hearings conducted by appropriations subcommittees at which Administration officials testify about agency funding requests.¹⁶ Appropriations subcommittees may also solicit input from Members at this stage, usually through hearings at which Members may testify as well as requests submitted by Member offices.¹⁷

Once decisions on top-line discretionary spending levels are made (known as "302(a) allocations"), the Budget Act requires the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to make further allocations from that total to each of their subcommittees (known as "302(b) suballocations").¹⁸ With these allocations, the appropriations subcommittees in the House and Senate will typically begin drafting, marking up, and forwarding their respective appropriations bills to the full committee. Appropriations bills will then be marked up at the full committee level and reported to the full House or Senate for floor consideration.

¹³ For more, see CRS Report R46417, *Congress's Power Over Appropriations: Constitutional and Statutory Provisions*, by Sean M. Stiff.

¹⁴ For more on the appropriations process, see CRS Report R47106, *The Appropriations Process: A Brief Overview*, by James V. Saturno and Megan S. Lynch.

¹⁵ For more on the Appropriations Committees' subcommittee structure, see CRS Report RL31572, *Appropriations Subcommittee Structure: History of Changes from 1920 to 2023*, by James V. Saturno.

¹⁶ In association with the President's budget request, agencies are required to submit individual agency budget justifications that provide more detail on their budget requests. For more, see CRS Report R47090, *Executive Agency Justification of the President's Budget: In Brief*, by Dominick A. Fiorentino.

¹⁷ For more on House Member participation in the appropriations process, see CRS Report R47031, *The House Appropriations Process: Opportunities for Member Participation*, by Megan S. Lynch.

¹⁸ Section 302(a) of the Budget Act (codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §633(a)) requires that overall spending levels set forth in the budget resolution be allocated among every committee in Congress with jurisdiction over spending legislation (known as "302(a) allocations.") Section 302(b) of the Budget Act (codified as amended at 2 U.S.C. §633(b)) requires the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to make 302(b) suballocations, which serve as enforceable levels for each of the 12 regular appropriations bills. For more on this allocation process, see CRS Report R47388, *Enforceable Spending Allocations in the Congressional Budget Process: 302(a)s and 302(b)s*, by Drew C. Aherne.

Historically, the House has initiated consideration of regular appropriations measures.¹⁹ In most years, the House Appropriations subcommittees have marked up and forwarded their bills to the full committee between April and July, and the bills have been reported from the full committee shortly thereafter. Consideration of regular appropriations bills on the House floor has historically begun in the summer and sometimes continued into the new fiscal year. While the House has considered some regular appropriations bills on the floor individually in recent years, it has also done so by packaging some or all of the bills to consider them simultaneously (commonly referred to as an “omnibus” or “minibus”).

The Senate Appropriations subcommittees and full committee have historically marked up and reported its bills anywhere from spring to late summer, but the timing and frequency of doing so have varied in recent years. The Senate reported few or no regular appropriations bills for each fiscal year from FY2020 through FY2023, and it has been relatively rare going back even further for the Senate to consider individual appropriations bills on the floor. Instead, the Senate has often acted on House-passed omnibus or minibus measures at a later stage in the process.

Prior to the start of a new fiscal year on October 1, the House and Senate may consider and pass all, some, or none of the regular appropriations bills. If a regular appropriations bill is not enacted prior to the start of a fiscal year, Congress may enact a continuing appropriations measure in order to avoid a funding gap or partial government shutdown.²⁰

Continuing Resolutions and Final Enactment of Regular Appropriations

To avert funding gaps and government shutdowns, when one or more regular appropriations bills have not been enacted by October 1, Congress may provide interim budget authority to agencies by enacting continuing appropriations measures (commonly known as “continuing resolutions” or “CRs”). Continuing resolutions typically provide budget authority at a specified rate, generally allowing agencies to obligate funds at a rate necessary to continue operations funded in the previous fiscal year. Continuing resolutions also place certain restrictions on agency spending while they are in effect. For example, CRs generally prohibit agencies from carrying out new programs, projects, and activities that were not funded in the previous fiscal year or making decisions that undermine Congress’s ability to make final, full-year funding decisions.²¹

Since FY1977, when the fiscal year was set as October 1 through September 30, Congress has enacted one or more CRs in all but three fiscal years, including in each fiscal year since FY1998.²² CRs vary in both duration and timing, but Congress typically enacts an initial CR in late September in the final days or weeks of the fiscal year that provides budget authority for the first weeks or months of the new fiscal year. From FY2013 through FY2023, for example, the initial CR enacted by Congress was in effect once until November, eight times until December, once until January, and once until March. Congress may subsequently enact additional CRs upon the original’s expiration while work is completed on any regular appropriations bills that have yet

¹⁹ In some recent years, however, the Senate has developed and reported original Senate bills prior to receiving a House-passed measure.

²⁰ For more on federal funding gaps, see CRS Report RS20348, *Federal Funding Gaps: A Brief Overview*, by James V. Saturno.

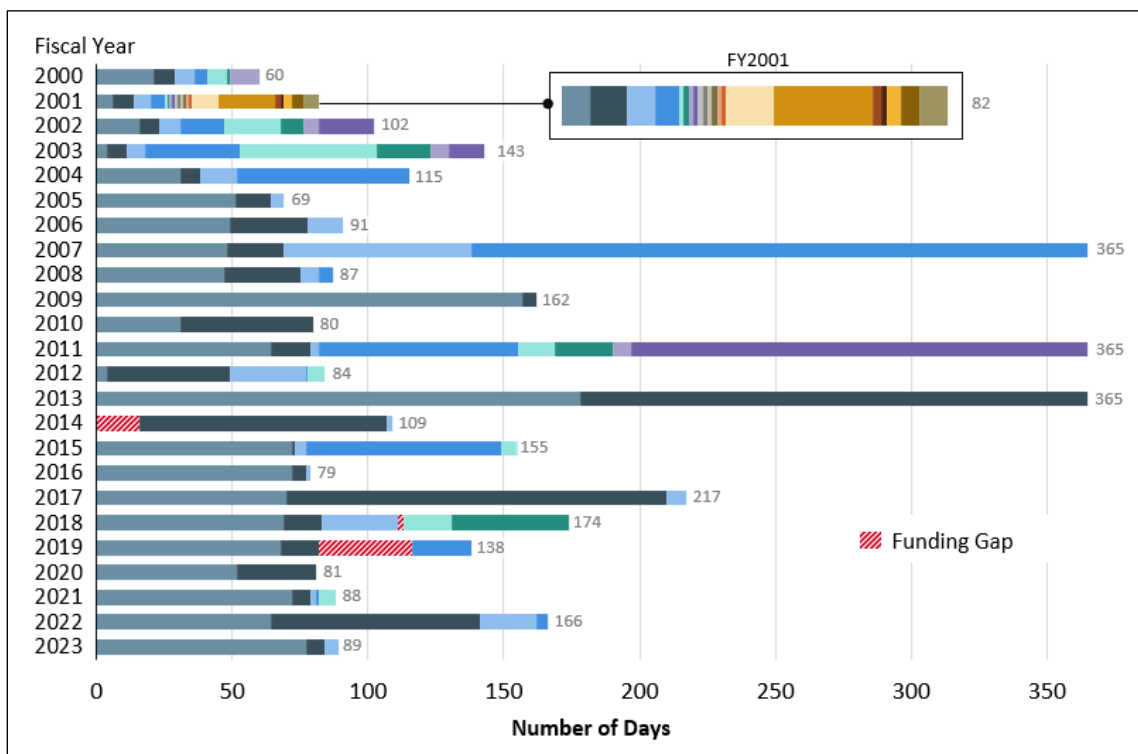
²¹ For more on continuing resolutions, see CRS Report R46595, *Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices*, coordinated by James V. Saturno.

²² Congress enacted all regular appropriations bills prior to October 1 for FY1977, FY1989, FY1995, and FY1997, although two CRs were enacted for FY1977 to provide funding for certain activities that were not included in regular appropriations acts.

to be enacted. Historically, these subsequent CRs have lasted anywhere from a few days to months, although Congress may choose to enact a CR that lasts through the end of the fiscal year (known as a “full-year CR”).²³

The aggregate duration of CRs varies depending on when Congress completes action on all regular appropriations or if it enacts a full-year CR (as shown in **Figure 2**). From FY2013 to FY2023, for example, Congress enacted all appropriations bills or enacted a full-year CR four times in December, once in January, once in February, four times in March, and once in May. In recent practice, it has been common for all or most of the regular appropriations bills to be enacted together as part of an omnibus or minibuss measure.

Figure 2. Aggregate Duration of Continuing Resolutions and Funding Gaps: FY2000-FY2023



Source: Information compiled from CRS Report R46595, *Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices*, coordinated by James V. Saturno; CRS Report RS20348, *Federal Funding Gaps: A Brief Overview*, by James V. Saturno; and the CRS Appropriations Status Table.

Notes: Each segment of the bar for a fiscal year represents the duration that one CR or funding gap was in effect. Funding gaps in FY2014, FY2018, and FY2019 are represented with red striped shading. The left-most segment for each fiscal year represents the first CR enacted by Congress, beginning coverage on October 1. The number on the right-hand side of each bar represents the total number of days between October 1 and the enactment of the final regular appropriations measure for that fiscal year (including October 1). For FY2007, FY2011, and FY2013, some or all of the regular appropriations bills were funded through a full-year CR, as shown above. This graph does not convey coverage of CRs. CRs can cover all or only some of the regular appropriations bills. Enactment of a CR does not mean that none of the regular appropriations bills were enacted prior, nor does it preclude passage of regular appropriations measures while the CR is in effect.

²³ Since FY2000, Congress has enacted full-year CRs that covered at least one of the regular appropriations bills three times (FY2007, FY2011, and FY2013).

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