

House Passes Spending Bill and Debt Limit Increase Over G.O.P. Opposition

The measure now heads to the Senate, setting up a clash with Republicans, who have warned they will block any debt ceiling increase.



By Emily Cochrane

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WASHINGTON — The House on Tuesday approved legislation to keep the government funded through early December, lift the limit on federal borrowing through the end of 2022 and provide emergency money for Afghan refugees and natural disaster recovery, setting up a fiscal showdown as Republicans warn they will block the measure in the Senate.

The bill is urgently needed to avert a government shutdown when funding lapses next week, and a first-ever debt default when the Treasury Department reaches the limit of its borrowing authority within weeks. But it has become ensnared in partisan politics, with Republicans refusing to allow a debt ceiling increase at a time when Democrats control Congress and the White House.

In pairing the debt limit raise with the spending package, Democrats had hoped to pressure Republicans into dropping their opposition to raising the debt ceiling, a routine step that allows the government to meet its obligations. But even with crucial funding for their states on the line, no Republicans voted for the legislation.

The bill passed with only Democratic votes in the closely divided House, 220 to 211.

And the prospects for passage in the 50-50 Senate appeared dim, as Republicans vowed they would neither vote for the legislation nor allow it to advance in the chamber, where 60 votes are needed to move forward.

The legislation, released only hours before the House vote, would extend government funding through Dec. 3, buying more time for lawmakers to negotiate the dozen annual spending bills, which are otherwise on track to lapse when the new fiscal year begins on Oct. 1. The package would also provide \$6.3 billion to help Afghan refugees resettle in the United States and \$28.6 billion to help communities rebuild from hurricanes, wildfires and other recent natural disasters. It would lift the federal debt limit through Dec. 16, 2022.

“As this bill provides critical support for our families and communities it also addresses recent emergencies that require federal resources and incorporates feedback from members on both sides of the aisle,” said Representative Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, the chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee, in a speech on the House floor.

Led by Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the minority leader, Republicans have warned for weeks that they had no intention of helping Democrats raise the limit on the Treasury Department’s ability to borrow. While the debt has been incurred with the approval of both parties, Mr. McConnell has repeatedly pointed to Democrats’ efforts to push multitrillion-dollar legislation into law over Republican opposition.

But in remarks on Tuesday, Mr. McConnell made a purely political argument for refusing to support raising the debt ceiling, saying the party in power should shoulder the task on its own.

“America must never default — we never have, and we never will,” Mr. McConnell said, speaking at his weekly news conference. “But whose obligation it is to do that changes from time to time, depending upon the government the American people have elected. Right now, we have a Democratic president, Democratic House, Democratic Senate.”

“The debt ceiling will be raised, as it always should be,” he added. “But it will be raised by the Democrats.”

As soon as the House vote gavelled shut, Mr. McConnell and Senator Richard C. Shelby of Alabama, the top Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee, unveiled their own funding legislation, without the debt ceiling increase.

Democrats, who joined with Republicans during the Trump administration to raise the debt ceiling, have argued that the G.O.P. is setting a double standard that threatens to sabotage the economy. Should the government default on its debt for the first time, it would prompt a financial crisis, shaking faith in American credit and cratering the stock market.



Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the minority leader, has warned for weeks that Republicans had no intention of helping Democrats raise the limit. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

Senate Democrats are expected to take up the bill in the coming days, essentially daring Republicans to vote against it. But without 10 Republicans in support, it would fail to advance past the 60-vote filibuster threshold.

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Lawmakers and aides have conceded that it is likely possible for Democrats, who control both chambers and the White House, to address the debt ceiling on their own, using the same fast-track budget process they are employing to muscle through their \$3.5 trillion social safety net plan over unified Republican opposition. That process, known as reconciliation, shields legislation from a filibuster.

But Democratic leaders have rejected that approach, which would be a time-consuming and tricky maneuver that could imperil their marquee domestic legislation, already at risk amid party infighting over its price tag and details. Instead, they have argued that Republicans should do their part to protect American credit and avoid a catastrophic default.

“Both Senate and House leadership have decided that that’s not an option they want to pursue,” said Representative John Yarmuth, Democrat of Kentucky and the chairman of the Budget Committee, on Monday. “I want to raise it to a gazillion dollars and just be done with it.”

He blasted Mr. McConnell’s position on the federal borrowing limit, saying, “For him to say, ‘The debt ceiling has to be done, but we’re not going to do it’ is to me just the most ludicrous statement I’ve ever heard from a public official.”

Understand the U.S. Debt Ceiling

What is the debt ceiling? The debt ceiling, also called the debt limit, is a cap on the total amount of money that the federal government is authorized to borrow via U.S. Treasury bills and savings bonds to fulfill its financial obligations. Because the U.S. runs budget deficits, it must borrow huge sums of money to pay its bills.

Mr. McConnell and other Senate Republicans have said they would support a stopgap spending package with the emergency relief attached, as long as the debt limit increase was removed.

“I begged the White House, starting about two and a half weeks ago, not to do it, and they’re going to do it anyway,” said Senator John Kennedy, Republican of Louisiana. “It tells me that they’re not really serious about helping my state.”

But Mr. Kennedy said he would still probably vote for the combined package because it provided disaster aid for his state.

The drama surrounding the bill illustrated the exceedingly delicate task Democratic leaders face in the coming weeks in averting fiscal disaster and enacting both a \$1 trillion infrastructure compromise and their far-reaching, \$3.5 trillion social policy package. Facing immovable Republican opposition to most of their agenda and razor-thin majorities in both chambers, they must find a way to unite moderate and progressive members to cobble together the bare minimum votes needed to pass any bill.

On Tuesday, House Democrats were forced to strip \$1 billion that had been included in the spending legislation for Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system, after progressives — some of whom have accused Israel of human rights abuses against Palestinians — balked at its inclusion in an emergency spending package.

The decision to jettison it for now infuriated some moderates in their ranks and sparked a flurry of Republican criticism. But Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the majority leader, said he would bring up a bill to provide that funding later in the week under a

suspension of the House rules.

“I was for that, I’m still for it — we ought to do it,” Mr. Hoyer said on the House floor, adding that he had spoken to Yair Lapid, the Israeli foreign minister, earlier in the day and offered his commitment to ensuring that it would clear the House. Senate Republicans included the provision in their own version of the spending package, released late Tuesday.

To help support the resettlement of Afghan refugees, the legislation would distribute billions of dollars across the federal government, including \$1.7 billion to help provide emergency housing, English language classes, and other support to refugees. It would also provide \$1.8 billion for the State Department, to cover the cost of evacuations and essential assistance for refugees.

The bill provides \$2.2 billion for the Pentagon, and requires a report on how the funds are spent and oversight of the treatment and living conditions for refugees at any Defense Department facility. And it requires that the administration report to Congress on military property, equipment and supplies that were either destroyed, removed from or left in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops.

Disaster aid, according to a summary provided by the House Appropriations Committee, is intended to address the damage caused by Hurricanes Ida, Delta, Zeta, and Laura, wildfires, droughts, winter storms, and other instances of natural devastation.

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