

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Line-Item Victory

June 24, 2006; Page A10

Pass the smelling salts. Congress did something right this week, and the vote was even bipartisan.

The House passed Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan's "legislative" line item veto Thursday with 247 votes, including most Republicans and 35 Democrats. This is a reversal from two years ago, when the GOP leadership helped to kill a previous version. The difference now is that Republicans are starting to realize their spending addiction could cost them this November.

Yes, we know: The line-item veto wouldn't by itself stop runaway spending. But it would give President Bush and his successors the power to single out and send back to Capitol Hill the hundreds of wasteful projects that have become the hallmark of spending bills. Members totted up \$27 billion worth of these pet projects last year, many slipped into bills at the last minute and with no one admitting authorship. Under the Ryan bill, Congress would have 14 legislative days to override a President's spending "rescissions" with a majority vote. Under current law, Congress must affirmatively approve any rescissions, and of course it never does.

With the President able to expose this spending, Members might think twice before funding their Alaskan bridges or California swimming pools. Ditto "rifleshots," or tax breaks for specific entities or individuals -- which have grown like skunkweed in recent years. Mr. Ryan narrowly crafted his bill to limit a President's reach to such targeted giveaways, rather than to broader tax policies.

Some Members claim the item veto is a power grab by the executive branch. But it's more accurate to say that it would restore some of the Presidential power that Congress stole in the 1970s. The budget act of 1974, passed over a weakened President Nixon, stripped the executive of the power to impound funds -- that is, to refuse to spend. Presidents going back to the republic's early days had used such authority.

A GOP Congress gave a more powerful line-item veto to President Clinton in the 1990s, only to have the Supreme Court declare it unconstitutional. Mr. Ryan's version is designed to pass Court scrutiny, and it resembles the version that some Democrats offered as an alternative in that 1990s' House debate.

So it was especially disappointing to see many Democrats who supported that version oppose it this week for transparently partisan reasons. The ranking Democrat on the Budget Committee, alleged "deficit hawk" John Spratt of South Carolina, was especially notable for opposing what he had supported in the 1990s. As for Republicans, only 15 opposed the bill. And under leadership pressure, even Appropriations Members -- the soul of the spending machine -- were allowed to break ranks and vote aye. Twenty-eight of 37 did so, a modern political miracle.

The focus now shifts to the Senate, where Budget Chairman Judd Gregg has included the item veto as part of a more sweeping budget reform. If Democrats block Mr. Gregg, Majority Leader Bill Frist should bring the item veto by itself for a floor vote. Even John Kerry supports it. Achievements have been rare for this Congress, so this is one opportunity not to let slip.