

***After days of needless anxiety, Trump signs the \$900 billion stimulus package***

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*The working assumption among stimulus package negotiators is that Trump was on board with the bill. That assumption was wrong.*



*President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump walk on the South Lawn of the White House on December 23 en route to Mar-a-Lago in Florida. Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images*

*President Donald Trump finally signed a \$900 billion relief bill and accompanying spending bill after days of unnecessary waffling.*

*Trump signed the stimulus package that was passed by Congress days before Christmas on Sunday evening. The package also includes a \$1.4 billion funding bill to keep the federal government up and running through September 2021. This brings to a close a confounding and chaotic episode. Had the president not signed, the United States could have seen a federal government shutdown (the existing funding runs out at midnight on Monday), and millions of Americans would have missed out on much-needed aid.*

*Trump waited so long to sign the bill that two unemployment insurance programs were allowed to lapse, which will likely lead to delayed benefits for unemployed workers across the country and [could cost workers a week of checks permanently](#).*

*In a [statement](#) issued upon signing, Trump touted his work on addressing the pandemic and economic fallout and said he would demand “many recessions” to the bill. He said he was sending a “strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed” and would send to lawmakers a redlined version of the deal with his demands. It’s unlikely those demands are going anywhere.*

*In his statement, Trump also nodded to the House's plan to vote to increase stimulus checks in the package from \$600 to \$2,000. He said that the Senate would "start the process" for a vote that increases checks but also repeals [Section 230 — an internet speech law](#) — and starts an investigation into (unfounded) claims of voter fraud. Again, this seems like a nonstarter: In a [statement](#) regarding Trump's decision to sign the relief bill, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell did not address those new asks.*

### ***How this even happened, briefly explained***

*In case you haven't been following, here's a basic outline of how we got here: Congress finally reached an agreement for a \$900 billion stimulus package in the days leading up to Christmas. The bill includes \$600 stimulus checks, an additional \$300 in weekly unemployment benefits through March, the extension of other CARES Act unemployment programs, small-business support, rental assistance, and food aid, among other provisions. [You can find a full explainer of what's in the legislation here](#). Lawmakers also wrapped into the deal the omnibus spending bill that's needed just to keep the government going.*

*Republicans and Democrats in Congress made concessions to get there — Democrats dropped their ask for state and local aid, and Republicans dropped their ask for corporate liability shields (which would have said businesses weren't responsible if workers or customers got sick from Covid-19).*

*The working assumption among negotiators was that Trump was on board with the deal and that Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who called the agreement "fabulous," [was on the same wavelength as the president](#). Congress passed the bill and left town for the holidays.*

*But that assumption was wrong — in a [video posted on Twitter](#) Tuesday night, Trump declared the bill a "disgrace" and asked Congress to "amend" it and increase the stimulus checks to \$2,000 ([an ask his own party didn't agree to](#)) and complained that the package had in it "wasteful spending" he wanted removed.*

*And so the country headed into Christmas — and Trump to his Mar-a-Lago resort — without anyone knowing what he was going to do. [The Wall Street Journal reported](#) that a copy of the bill was printed and flown to Florida in case Trump decided to sign it. The Washington Post reported that the president [repeatedly changed his mind](#) on what to do.*

*On Sunday, he relented. Trump is still asking for changes to the bill, but at this point, that's pretty unlikely. House Democrats are still going to try to get stimulus checks up to \$2,000 from \$600. Even though the president supports the idea, it's probably not going anywhere. House Republicans [blocked a vote on the measure last week](#). The House will hold a recorded vote on the issue on Monday, which is likely to pass the lower house but has little prospects in the Senate.*

*Trump's decision to lump in Section 230 and voter fraud investigations makes progress even more unlikely. He has also vetoed the National Defense Authorization Act, trying to force a Section 230 repeal in it, [but Congress will override his veto](#). Section 230 basically says that internet companies are allowed to police their online*

platforms however they want with few exceptions and aren't responsible for what people post on them. Facebook and Twitter have been increasingly aggressive about policing Trump's own false and misleading claims, and the president appears annoyed at these content moderation practices, so he's made Section 230 the centerpiece of his complaints.

### **Regardless of whether this is a win for Trump, it's a loss for unemployed people**

After Trump finally relented and signed the stimulus package, there's been some debate about whether this was a win or a loss for him. The president didn't really get anything he wanted here — the bill is going forward as is, and the \$2,000 stimulus checks are probably going to be stopped by his own party. It's good that the government isn't going to shut down, and the stimulus package is important and helpful.

But regardless of the political points on the board for the outgoing president, the back-and-forth caused a lot of stress for unemployed people and, ultimately, could cost them money. Two programs for the unemployed put in place under the CARES Act — one for contractors, freelancers, and gig workers, and another that adds on additional weeks of insurance — were allowed to expire on December 26. Getting them back up and running is going to take time. [Congress had already procrastinated so much that there were going to be problems with the programs](#), and Trump made matters worse. The deal also entailed an extra \$300 in weekly unemployment benefits for 11 weeks. Since Trump waited to sign the bill, that could be cut to 10.

That the president finally signed the legislation is a win for people who need the money, but it's less of a win than it should have been.

### **Trump caves — but not before putting the GOP in an ugly spot** Aaron Blake

To the extent Donald Trump's ascent to the presidency was about something besides raw partisanship and a desire to shake up Washington, it was touted as putting a deal-maker in charge.

Trump tried to assure voters that his business acumen was just what the country needed to “drain the swamp” and reverse decades of poor negotiations with nefarious adversaries, both foreign and domestic.

With less than a month to go in his presidency, Trump put a significant ding in whatever exists of that portion of his legacy.

Trump decided over the Christmas holiday to threaten not to sign a combination coronavirus relief package and spending bill. Trump's chief complaints: The deal delivered only \$600 payments to the American people, rather than his desired \$2,000,

*and he didn't like the so-called pork — and especially foreign funding — in the legislation.*

*The exercise was bizarre from the jump for a number of reasons.*

*First was that this was a deal forged by his own administration, with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin serving as lead negotiator and hailing it shortly before Trump decided to call it “a disgrace.”*

*Second was that Trump raised virtually none of these concerns before the bill's passage, instead waiting until after the hard work had (apparently) been done to hijack the process.*

*And third was that the pork that Trump and his media allies criticized not only wasn't in the coronavirus relief bill but was rather in an accompanying omnibus spending bill — actually by and large money that [Trump himself had requested in his own proposed budget](#).*

*GOP Rep. Anthony Gonzalez (Ohio) summed it up best last week: The whole gambit has now fallen apart in a spectacular but utterly predictable way, with Trump relenting and [signing the bill Sunday night](#). Trump dubiously claimed nonspecific concessions from Congress in voter fraud.*

*He also said he will send lawmakers a “redlined” version of the bill “insisting that those funds be removed” from it. But Trump can insist all he wants; Congress has no duty to actually follow through on his demand to.*

*In other words: Trump got nothing. The whole thing was a waste. It appears to have been some combination of a fit of pique, posturing for his post-presidency political efforts, and an effort to leverage Republicans into supporting his attempts to overturn the 2020 election results.*

*But while it was all utterly pointless, that doesn't mean it won't have repercussions. Indeed, if anything, this was a crystallizing moment for our new political reality — but not a terribly helpful one for the GOP.*

*The biggest takeaway here is that Trump effectively cast a spotlight on Republicans' refusal to provide more direct coronavirus aid. When Trump decided to go down this road, Democrats were only so happy to play along for their own political ends, because it was Republicans who opposed the bigger checks.*

*You're right that \$600 isn't good enough, Mr. President, so let's vote on \$2,000! Trump may see some benefit for himself in having insisted on more aid, but now Democrats can even more conclusively point out that it was Republicans who explicitly and repeatedly rejected that. That wouldn't seem to be a terribly helpful exercise on the eve of two crucial Senate runoffs in Georgia.*

*The second upshot of all this is what it says about the future of the Republican Party. Starting in a few weeks, it will again be the opposition party in Washington. The last time that happened, it quickly gave rise to the tea party movement. Republicans*

*suddenly got religion on fiscal conservatism during Barack Obama's presidency before lapsing into a life of sin and exploding spending under Trump.*

*Every time Trump does something like this, he forces Republicans and his media allies to reconcile their positions with his. In this case, that was easier to do with the alleged pork than the coronavirus checks, so the GOP focused on the former.*

*While pretending that the foreign funding was in the coronavirus relief package and ignoring that Trump had requested it, they echoed him in crying foul.*

*The question now is whether that was a strategy of necessity momentarily foisted upon them by Trump, or if they're all going to take that ball and run with it. Even before Trump made his threats, stories about the alleged pork permeated much of conservative media.*

*In some ways, Trump seemed to be reacting to that coverage as much as leading the backlash himself. The stage is increasingly set for the GOP's convenient return to deficit hawkery.*

*The dynamics of the whole thing were familiar. It wasn't the first time Trump has hijacked a deal after it was already agreed to by his own administration. Nor was it the first time he made rather curious use of supposed leverage that *didn't actually provide much leverage*.*

*It was Trump suddenly engaging on something when he decided it interested him, but also when the moment was already lost.*

*And the thing is, the outcome might indeed have been different if he had decided to insist on these things when they were actually being negotiated. Trump's obstinance has occasionally served him in such negotiations. But the dealmaker-in-chief decided to deploy that obstinance in a completely nonsensical way at a completely nonsensical time, and his incoherent strategy now leaves his party to pick up the pieces.*