

# Senate backs GOP budget in step forward for tax revamp

By **ANDREW TAYLOR**  
Associated Press



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite  
**Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., walks from the chamber to his office during a long series of votes at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday.**

WASHINGTON — Republicans on Thursday muscled a \$4 trillion budget through the Senate in a major step forward for President Donald Trump's ambitious promise of "massive tax cuts and reform."

The 51-49 vote sets the stage for debate later this year to dramatically overhaul the U.S. tax code for the first time in three decades, cutting rates for individuals and corporations while eliminating trillions of dollars of deductions and special interest tax breaks.

The tax cuts would add up to \$1.5 trillion to the deficit over the coming decade, however, as Republicans have shelved fears about the growing budget deficit in favor of a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rewrite tax laws.

"These are reforms that change incentives and drive growth, and we've never done that before," said Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa.

Divisions within the GOP indicate the process won't be easy despite the political imperative.

The upcoming tax

measure, always a top item on the GOP agenda, has taken on even greater urgency with the failure of the party to carry out its longstanding promise to dismantle former President Barack Obama's signature health care law. Republicans have said failure on taxes

would be politically devastating in next year's midterm elections, when control of the House and Senate are at stake.

When reconciled with the House budget plan, the nonbinding measure would set up special procedures to pass follow-up tax legislation without the threat of a filibuster by Senate Democrats. Pressure is mounting, however, on the House to simply adopt the Senate budget plan rather than risk lengthy negotiations that could delay the tax measure.

The House measure calls for a tax plan that wouldn't add to the deficit, as well as \$200 billion worth of cuts to benefit programs that the Senate has rejected.

Democrats blasted the GOP budget, warning voters that the upcoming tax measure will shower benefits on top-bracket earners, corporations, business part-

nerships and people inheriting multimillion-dollar estates. Trump promises that the tax plan — still under development — is aimed at the middle class, but previous versions have seen upper-income individuals benefiting the most.

"Unfortunately, there's a big gap between the administration's rhetoric on these issues and the reality of what is on paper," said Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, the top Democrat on the tax-writing Finance Committee, who warned that Trump's plan is "slanted overwhelmingly toward the very top."

"The more people learn about this tax bill, the less they will like it," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "That's what led to the demise of health care, ultimately, is that it was unpopular with the American people."

Only one Republican,

Rand Paul of Kentucky, voted against the budget. He said the measure permits too much spending and abandons the GOP drive to repeal the Obama health law. An amendment by Paul to revive the "Obamacare" repeal failed by a 2-to-1 margin.

Under Capitol Hill's byzantine budget rules, the nonbinding budget resolution is supposed to lay out a long-term fiscal framework for the government. This year's measure calls for \$473 billion in cuts from Medicare over 10 years and more than \$1 trillion from Medicaid. All told, Senate Republicans would cut spending by more than \$5 trillion over a decade, though they don't attempt to spell out where the cuts would come from.

Even so, the measure doesn't promise to balance the budget, projecting deficits that would never drop below \$400 billion.

## BRIEFLY

### Puerto Rico still stumbles in the dark a month after Maria

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — One man climbs 24 flights of stairs several times a day alongside dormant elevators. Street vendors hawk plastic washboards for \$20. And families outstretch their hands as crews in helicopters drop supplies in communities that remain isolated.

This is life one month after Hurricane Maria slammed into the U.S. territory on Sept. 20 as a Category 4 storm that killed at least 48 people, destroyed tens of thousands of homes and left tens of thousands of people without a job. It was the strongest hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in nearly a century, with winds just shy of Category 5 force.

"I've never seen anything like this," retired schoolteacher Santa Rosario said as she scanned empty shelves at a supermarket in the capital of San Juan that had run out of water jugs — again.

Maria caused as much as an estimated \$85 billion in damage across an island already mired in an 11-year recession. That has complicated and delayed efforts to restructure a portion of a \$74 billion public debt load that officials say is unpayable. And it has thrust Puerto Rico's territorial status into the international spotlight, reviving a sharp debate about its political future as the island attempts to recover from flooding, landslides and power and water outages.

Maria has also put Puerto Rico into the U.S. political spotlight with President Donald Trump on Thursday giving himself a "10" for his response to the devastation wrought by the hurricane. Asked when the 3.4 million U.S. citizens living there could expect power to be fully restored, Trump said it will take "a while."

### Senators push for more online transparency in elections

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senators are moving to boost transparency for online political ads, unveiling on Thursday what could be the first of several pieces of legislation to try to lessen influence from Russia or other foreign actors on U.S. elections.

The bill by Democratic Sens. Mark Warner of Virginia and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota would require social media companies like Facebook and Twitter to keep public files of election ads and meet the same disclaimer requirements as political broadcast and print advertising. Federal regulations now require television and radio stations to make publicly available the details of political ads they air. That includes who runs the ad, when it runs and how much it costs.

The bill also would require companies to "make reasonable efforts" to ensure that election ads are not purchased directly or indirectly by a foreign national. The move comes after Facebook revealed that ads that ran on the company's social media platform and have been linked to a Russian internet agency were seen by an estimated 10 million people before and after the 2016 election.

Warner is the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, which is investigating Russian meddling in the 2016 race, and Klobuchar is the top Democrat on the Senate Rules Committee, which oversees elections. The legislation also has support from Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who is the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Lawmakers on the Senate intelligence panel and other committees investigating Russian influence have said one of the main roles of Congress will be to pass legislation to try to stop the foreign meddling. That's in contrast to special counsel Robert Mueller, who is also investigating and has the ability to prosecute if he finds any criminal wrongdoing.

### Obama tells Democrats to reject politics of division, fear

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — Former President Barack Obama called on fellow Democrats to reject politics of "division" and "fear" while rallying on Thursday with party's candidates for governors in Virginia and New Jersey.

"Why are we deliberately trying to misunderstand each other, and be cruel to each other and put each other down? That's not who we are," Obama said at the Virginia rally in front of several thousand supporters.

Stepping back into the political spotlight for the first time since leaving the White House in January, Obama did not mention President Donald Trump in his speeches at Richmond's convention center or at a Newark hotel. But he did tell crowds at both events that they could send a message to the rest of the country in the upcoming elections.

"Our democracy's at stake and it's at stake right here in Virginia," Obama said.

Virginia and New Jersey are the only two states electing new governors this year and those Nov. 7 races will be considered a bellwether of Democrats' strength in the face of Trump's victory last year.



AP Photo/Steve Helber  
**Former President Barack Obama listens to the crowd during a rally with Virginia's Democratic gubernatorial candidate Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam, Richmond, Va., Thursday.**

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