Flashback: Previous Debt Limit Votes Have Not Been Good Ones

As recently as 2004, the debt limit was $7.384 billion. Six debt limit increases in five years have brought it to $12.1 trillion and Democrats are prepared soon to raise it again. Congress has voted on the debt limit five times in the past four years. While those votes are sometimes forgettable, occasionally they are not.

March 20, 2006: This was the last stand-alone debt limit vote on which then-Senator Obama voted. He was one of 48 members to vote against the increase, which passed with 52 votes.[i] He said: "The fact that we are here today to debate raising America's debt limit is a sign of leadership failure. It is a sign that the U.S. Government can't pay its own bills. It is a sign that we now depend on ongoing financial assistance from foreign countries to finance our Government's reckless fiscal policies. … Increasing America's debt weakens us domestically and internationally. Leadership means that 'the buck stops here. Instead, Washington is shifting the burden of bad choices today onto the backs of our children and grandchildren. America has a debt problem and a failure of leadership. Americans deserve better."[ii]

September 29, 2007: By a roll call vote of 53-42,[iii] the Senate approved a standalone measure to increase the debt limit by $850 billion.

July 30, 2008: The Housing and Economic Recovery Act. Commonly known as the legislation that authorized the government takeover of the Government Sponsored Enterprises (GSEs) Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, CBO scored this bill as increasing Federal deficits by $25 billion and authorized the Treasury Secretary to purchase an unlimited amount of obligations and securities of the GSEs.[iv] Since this commitment was open-ended,[v] it also included an $800 billion increase in the debt limit. This bill was sent back and forth between the House and Senate for almost a year before the final bill passed the Senate by a roll call vote of 72-13.[vi]

October 3, 2008: The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act (EESA). This legislation authorized the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), a $700 billion revolving fund to be used by the Treasury Secretary to purchase financial assets. Because of the indefinite and open-ended nature of the commitments authorized by this legislation, and the fact the debt subject to limit was about $430 billion short of the limit at the time, the EESA also raised the debt limit $700 billion. After TARP passed the Senate by a vote of 74-25,[vii] the original purpose of the program quickly shifted to making direct capital investments in banks, insurance, and auto companies.

February 17, 2009: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The $787 billion stimulus legislation was the largest piece of emergency legislation in history. Ostensibly designed to stabilize the economy and completely debt financed, the legislation included a $789 billion increase in the debt limit. The conference report passed the Senate by a vote of 60-38.[viii]

[i] Roll call vote at: http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=109&session=2&vote=00054

[ii] Sen. Obama, Congressional Record, S.2237-8, 3/16/06

[iii] Roll call vote at: http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=1&vote=00354

[iv] See CBO score of H.R. 3221, http://cbo.gov/ftpdocs/95xx/doc9597/hr3221.pdf

[v] See the CBO analysis of the Administration's Proposal to Authorize Federal Financial Assistance to the Government Sponsored Enterprises for Housing at: http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/95xx/doc9574/07-22-GSEs.pdf

[vi] Roll call vote at: http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00186

[vii] Roll call vote at: http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00213

[viii] Roll call vote at: http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=111&session=1&vote=00064