



The Daily Dish

Pursuing Budget Process Reform

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Eakinomics: Pursuing Budget Process Reform

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When President Trump signed the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019 into law on August 2nd, Congress officially cleared the decks of much of its must-do legislating for the next 2 years. Given the dim prospects of serious policymaking during a presidential campaign, perhaps this 2-year agreement is just a practical necessity. But not all policymakers are resigned to meaningless “messaging.”

Senator Mike Enzi has decided to take his charge as Budget Committee Chairman seriously and pursue the hard and thankless job of reforming the federal budget process. The chairman, the members, and staff of the budget committee should be commended for the sincerity of their efforts, which has produced four discussion drafts of process-reform options. While there are necessarily tradeoffs involved in each of the reform options, they are all worthy of consideration.

Budget process reform is an oft-mentioned chore that is rarely completed. For example, the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 created a special congressional committee, the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform, which, despite an earnest effort, failed to find consensus and folded at the end of last year. Given the likelihood of failure, Chairman Enzi wisely divided the up the challenge of process reform into more narrow reform proposals, covering four areas: fiscal controls, budget enforcement, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and Senate procedures for considering the congressional budget resolution.

The first reform is the most ambitious, proposing to alter, among other things, the makeup of the Senate Budget Committee (to be renamed the Fiscal Control Committee) and the content of [the budget resolution](#), along with establishing a separate “spinoff” joint resolution that would mirror the discretionary spending limits in the budget *and* increase the debt limit by the amount assumed in the budget resolution. The “spinoff” would have to be signed by the president and would have the force of law. The proposal would also establish a new, fast-track process for deficit reduction. This approach to reform is ambitious, and while its adoption is unlikely in the near term, it is a worthwhile starting point for improvements to a process that has largely been abandoned in favor of multi-year budget agreements.

The remaining three reforms are narrower in scope, focusing on reforms to specific congressional and Senate institutions. Their relatively modest scope suggests they may be more in the realm of the achievable than the first proposal. Chairman Enzi’s proposal to improve congressional budget enforcement includes measures to improve public disclosure of budget information and restrict certain parliamentary loopholes in the budget process. These reforms seem like good housekeeping. The Chairman’s reforms to CBO would require the agency to disclose more data and methodology and provide additional estimates related to annual spending bills and interest costs. While not all forms of transparency at CBO [are equal](#), this reform package includes a number of worthwhile improvements. Last, Chairman Enzi’s proposal would clean up to the “vote-a-rama” process that slows Senate consideration of a congressional budget resolution. This process has devolved into a somewhat silly “messaging” exercise that likely chills Senate interest in considering budgets at all, and it is worth

scrapping.

Budget process reform will not solve our budget challenge. Until elected leaders level with the American people on the need to cut spending and raise taxes, budget debates will be largely theater. Nevertheless, having a functioning budget process in place for when that day finally comes would be significant accomplishment.