

THE POLITICAL FEASIBILITY OF DOING WHAT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE: REFORMING THE FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS¹

Prepared for the National Budgeting Roundtable

Working Paper #3

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SUMMARY

This paper was written to advise high-level practitioners about how major reforms to the federal budget process might become politically feasible. It draws selectively from political science and related academic research in hopes of expanding the concepts used by practitioners to analyze political feasibility. By suggesting how best to advocate for ambitious reforms, it aims to provide an alternative to what admittedly are very reasonable and very pessimistic arguments about the potential for progress.

The paper begins by describing why political dysfunction makes reform almost impossible, and then outlines two influential theoretical perspectives from political science, rational institutionalism and historical institutionalism, that usually support this assessment. It then argues that an alternative theoretical perspective provides more hope for those who would like to reform the budget process. Approaches in this tradition emphasize how ideas are generated, discussed, and incorporated into the calculations made by elected officials.

Assuming this ideational approach is correct, success in reforming the budget process will depend in part on being able to persuade elected officials that proposed reforms would be effective in attaining the goals they are claimed to advance. Elected officials must also come to view those goals as desirable.

The paper suggests that though macrobudgetary sustainability is very important, reform advocates have overemphasized this goal. It argues that reform advocates should rebalance their advocacy agenda by developing alternatives for improving how the budget process could be used to assess the condition of the nation, establish strategic priorities that are informed by the condition assessment, and then reallocate budgetary resources toward higher priorities.

¹ Prepared with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Thanks to Steve Redburn, Paul Posner, and attendees at the National Budgeting Roundtable for comments on drafts.

WHY FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS REFORM IS THOUGHT TO BE IMPOSSIBLE

Effective budgeting requires difficult choices, due in part to uncertainty about the future, but more so due to preference disagreements. Some politicians want smaller government and others larger government; some pledge never to accept tax increases while others are open to them; and some view current deficits and debts as too risky while others find projected deficits and debt acceptable through the medium term. Everyone favors allocating more funds to some programs and fewer funds to other programs, but they don't agree on which programs fit in each category.

So some dissatisfaction with budgetary outcomes is inevitable--as the old saying goes, budgeting is practiced well (and implicitly, without partisan bias) when there is a "uniform distribution of dissatisfaction" with its outcomes. Yet there is now universal dissatisfaction--from the right, left, and center--not only with federal budget outcomes, but also with the federal budget process itself. The process appears to excel only in enabling politicians to blame each other while producing a surfeit of inaction on important policy issues. This has damaged the functioning of government agencies, hindered the reallocation of resources towards higher priorities, and constrained effective management of the macroeconomy.

Over the decades since adoption of the Congressional Budget Act (CBA), advocates have repeatedly proposed numerous reforms to the process. These reforms would change who makes decisions (e.g., converting to a joint budget resolution would formally add the President to the process), when decisions are made (e.g., a biennial budget), the information used in the process (e.g., accrual accounting for credit programs), and goals of the process (e.g., a formal target for public debt as a percentage of gross domestic product). Some reforms were adopted, notably in

the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 (BEA) and the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA). Other proposed reforms, some of which are described below, were rejected, again and again. So if asked to identify a quality that applies well to advocates of federal budget process reform, a good choice might be “persistent.” Some alternative descriptors with different connotations are “dogged” (for showing great determination) or “obstinate” (for sticking with a position despite numerous defeats).²

In the give-and-take politics of the period after World War II, being obstinate often used to be considered a negative quality. There was a good reason why this norm was relatively strong--the institutional design of American government makes compromise a necessity if policies are to be changed. At present, however, far more legislators are being obstinate and feeling comfortable with this behavior. This is particularly true of many conservative Republican legislators in Congress, who view themselves as standing up for principles that would be violated by the legislative compromises on offer. Reaching compromises has become more difficult as polarization between the parties has increased significantly in recent decades, with Democrats moving a bit to the left and Republicans moving much more so to the right. Bridging the gaps between the parties' positions on numerous issues now seems unlikely at best, and few politicians who want to be re-elected even consider edging near the chasm between the parties. Legislators may say that they are willing to compromise, yet they view their adversaries not as opponents, but as enemies (Ignatieff, 2013). Usually the proposed terms for compromise are effectively demands for surrender by the other side. That control of Congress and Presidency has often been divided between the parties accentuates the gap--when an important election is

² I am among those who have offered suggestions. See, e.g., Meyers, 2014, 2009, 1996; and Posner, et. al., 2012.

not far away, which is always the case in the U.S., politicians often find it valuable to take hard positions that play to their electoral bases. But if unified party control ever returns, the majority will still be unable to produce agreements if the Senate minority is still allowed to exploit the modern filibuster's power.

In this context, it might be said that those who have persistently advocated budget process reforms have been politically naive, having wasted much effort when there is no chance of success. Legislators with different and very strong preferences for specific policy outcomes, who all complain about the process, don't appear to want a budget process that would be mutually beneficial (White, 2009). Each party has instead tried to exploit the budget process to gain advantage, using cliffs, sequesters, triggers, and threatened shutdowns.³ Such repeated intransigence has destroyed what little trust remained between the parties (Mann and Ornstein, 2013; Binder and Lee, 2013).

Against the charge that persistent advocates of budget process reform have been politically naive, it can be argued that they are no different from most advocates in Washington. As Kingdon's classic work on policy change has shown, successful advocates adopt advocacy tactics in order to succeed over the long haul (2011, revised second edition). They prepare for more propitious times than the present by following a process that he called "softening up"--repeatedly calling for adoption of the preferred policy. They attempt to connect their preferred policy to the series of policy problems that seriously concern decision-makers. They explain the preferred policy's mechanisms for reducing those problems, supporting their claims by referring to expert analyses. They modify their preferred policy after listening to the concerns and

³ Some budget reformers have viewed these features as second-best replacements for a long-lost "regular order" and as pragmatic substitutes for the difficult task of developing a new "regular order." See Meyers, 2014, for a critique.

objections voiced by those with the power to reject their proposals. They do all this not in expectation of immediate success, but in hopes of being ready when political conditions are more favorable. At that time, their proposal might attain the heady status of “an idea whose time has come.” The lesson is that substantial reform of the budget process requires not only the investment of time but also the exercise of tactical flexibility.

BUDGETARY “BEST PRACTICES” VS. “POLITICAL REALISM”

In framing their advice for budget reform, advocates often use the verb “must.” Here are examples of this usage from a recent article by Reischauer:

There are four essential components to a functional process:

One: There must be some mechanism that incentivizes or forces policymakers to agree on a medium term – meaning 10 to 15 years – fiscal plan, one embodying a mainstream view of the desired fiscal path. That path might be a goal for the deficit, the debt-to-GDP ratio or the size of government 15 years out. The plan must then be translated into annual targets for overall revenues and broad categories of mandatory and discretionary spending that achieve the plan’s bottom lines. Since economic conditions, the international environment, and national priorities change, there must be a regularized process for periodically reviewing and modifying the fiscal plan.

Two: The process must ensure that annual spending and taxing decisions are made in a timely fashion, at least before the start of the fiscal year. The ability of individuals and small groups of legislators to slow down or derail basic budgetary decisions must be reduced significantly.

Three: The responsibility for failure must be clearer. This may require some reallocation of budgetary authority between the executive and legislative branches or within the legislative branch.

Four: Some automatic mechanisms must stand in when the political process fails. These can incentivize policymakers to act by providing them with some political cover. To be effective, the mechanisms should be calibrated to provide a partial, rather than a full, substitute for restraint the political system could not swallow (Reischauer, 2015).

Usually in American politics, when advocates use “must,” they are signaling that elected officials will lose the support of these advocates if the officials don’t act in accord with the imperative. That is typically not why the term is used by budget process reformers, as their power to enforce threats is relatively low compared to, say, current Social Security beneficiaries who would be very upset if their monthly payments were reduced. Instead, budget experts are declaring their deep concerns about the negative effects of current budget practices, and setting out what they see as better ones. Lists of budgetary “best practices” are based on the belief that explicit statements about desirable norms of budgeting will raise awareness of the potential benefits from reform (see, e.g., Committee on the Fiscal Future, 2010).

Prescriptions for how to budget well are nothing new. An influential statement was made by Lewis, a budget practitioner with the Atomic Energy Commission, in “Toward a Theory of Budgeting” (1952). He argued for comparisons of numerous budget alternatives on the basis of their relative values as measured using economic analysis. This perspective was integral to the Department of Defense’s adoption of PPBS at the start of the Kennedy administration. Yet also in that period, Lindblom (1959) and Wildavsky (1961, 1964, 1966) set out devastating critiques of rationalist budgeting--policy uncertainties and preference disagreements made these approaches analytically unmanageable and politically infeasible. They argued it was preferable to “muddle through,” making incremental changes in response to small lessons learned.

Ironically, what is perhaps the most popular perspective in modern-day political science also concludes that ambitions to improve budgeting are politically infeasible, but based on rationalist assumptions rather than incrementalist ones. There are several variants of this approach, such as “public choice” and “rational institutionalism;” they have been guided by the

assumptions of classical microeconomics and the insights of game theory (Aldrich's presidential address to the American Political Science Association provides a current synthesis of a massive literature, 2015). The basic logic is as follows:

- Legislators can be best understood as single-minded seekers of re-election.
- Most citizens also have short time horizons--they are especially concerned about what has happened recently and what is likely to happen in the near future. Many are relatively uninformed about policy issues. Depending on the timing of the election, either most of them or many of them don't vote. Unborn voters don't vote and have no ability to prevent being burdened through excessive borrowing with the costs of current government subsidies.
- In contrast, concentrated economic interests, such as the major companies in each sector of the economy, participate heavily in politics. They provide valuable electoral resources such as campaign donations to elected officials, who in return support government provision of subsidies to these interests. When those subsidies provide no general benefits to citizens, this process is called "rent-seeking."
- Government programs that provide subsidies to a broad base of beneficiaries also engender effective mobilization, particularly when the benefits are visible, the beneficiaries are not of low social status, and producers of the benefits support maintaining them.
- The two major parties are supported by different coalitions of mobilized interests. To the extent possible, the parties design policies to reward their supporters. When one party has unified control of government and is able to overcome the filibuster--a rare occurrence--it imposes the costs of rewarding its supporters on the supporters of the opposing party.

- When neither of the two parties is dominant, on occasion they reach a compromise, often facilitated by agreement to shift costs into the future. More frequently they disagree, leaving policy in its status quo position. The parties cover their policy inaction by engaging in symbolic political combat. Each tries to avoid being blamed while attempting to blame the other party.
- The burdens of budgetary outcomes are thereby placed on the general public and on future citizens. Disrupting this through budget process reform is very unlikely since elected officials benefit from the status quo.

By emphasizing barriers to change, rational institutionalism and public choice are theories of political infeasibility. They support predictions that there will be little change, a type of projection sometimes called “political realism.” This perspective is pervasive among budget practitioners, whose personal experiences provide strong psychological confirmation that disrupting the status quo is very difficult. A typical statement along these lines was made by Collender

I was asked three times last week by different policymakers whether a new Congressional budget process should be considered this year. The answer is no, no way, absolutely not and don’t even think about it. Here’s why. . . There’s simply no consensus about the fiscal equivalent of where you want to end up at the end of the day’s hike, that is, on what a new process should accomplish. Without that type of consensus, any new budget process is virtually doomed to fail. Because there will always be questions about its legitimacy and value, there will be a strong tendency not to implement it. . . (2010)

Authors using another academic approach, historical institutionalism, often reach a slightly different conclusion about political infeasibility: there will be change, but the potential for change is greatly influenced by what happened in the past. The methodology of historical institutionalism is different than the rationalist approach that deduces predictions from axioms

about incentives, information, and collective actions; instead it blends historical evidence with ideas about how the sequences in historical time develop. (For a still useful summary of the various institutional approaches in different social science disciplines, see Goodin, 1996).

The historical institutionalism concept most relevant to this paper is “path dependence.” It was popularized by institutional economists such as North and then imported into political science. In a path dependence sequence, after a choice is made at a “critical juncture,” this choice is reinforced by subsequent events so that switching away from it becomes increasingly difficult. In economic history, path dependence has produced “lock-in” to inefficient technologies such as the QWERTY keyboard. A common example for path dependence in American public policy is the limited prospect of universal, single-payer coverage for health care, the potential attractiveness of which was lessened once workers received employer-provided health insurance that was excluded from income taxation and/or paid into and received benefits from Medicare.

Pierson argued that path dependence often results from a positive feedback concept that he borrowed from economics, “increasing returns.” When “the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time,” then changes to an institution become less likely (2000b, p. 252; for other proposed path dependence mechanisms, see Deeg, 2006, 9-10). This idea can be used to supplement the textbook understanding of how the Congress of the twenty-first century has maintained a structure and process that stabilized about a century ago. In a classic article, Polsby described how the constitution specified a bare minimum of organizational characteristics for Congress, and then how during the 19th century Congress became a complex organization, a process that Polsby called

“institutionalization” (1968). Subsequent research added more complexity to this description--for example, Stewart described how spending powers bounced between authorizing and appropriations committees in response to shifts in national politics and to the competing turf claims made by committees (1989). By the early twentieth century, though, the committees reached a critical juncture-type settlement on their relative roles, as represented by the split of responsibilities codified in House Rule XXI. Even though some provisions in this rule are routinely violated, such as the prohibition of “legislation” in appropriations bills, the distinction between authorizing and appropriations committees has stuck. The increasing returns explanation for this is based on the tradition of seniority rights--changing the committee structure would jeopardize the investments legislators have made by spending years serving on a committee, thereby increasing their chances of gaining a chairmanship.⁴

Those who use either the rational institutionalism or historical institutionalism approach can be counted on to predict the infeasibility of adopting reforms that would support Reischauer’s principles, such as: “The responsibility for failure must be clearer.” He suggested as mechanisms to produce this result converting the Congressional concurrent resolution on the budget into a joint resolution agreed to by the President and Congress, and empowering the Congressional budget committees.⁵ Yet recall one of the highlights of *Saturday Night Live*--Dana Carvey’s impersonation of President George H.W. Bush saying “Wouldn’t be prudent. Not gonna do it.” The impersonation worked on multiple levels, one being that this President reached the 1990 BEA agreement with leadership Democrats to promote a more prudent fiscal

⁴ Term limits and competition for chairs now make these investments worth much less in the House.

⁵ I support both of these proposals. Meyers, 1990; Joyce, 2011b.

policy, reversing his ambition-driven convention pledge not to raise taxes. Many political scientists view this compromise as a critical juncture, because in its aftermath Newt Gingrich led a revolt among conservative House Republicans against budgetary compromises, and then took control of the House, events that have much to do with the rightward shift of the Senate and the rise of the Tea Party. And on the general principle of increasing visibility of failure to reach compromises, classic works in political science show how legislators are skilled at avoiding constituents' blame for actions perceived to be failures, and how they maneuver to make their actions less traceable by the public (Weaver, 1986; Arnold, 1992).

Historical events thus have been arrayed into a vicious cycle; the result is a new normal in which the parties cannot be expected to reach stable agreements, and in which Congress will not delegate power to the President without a struggle. So then why would legislators and the President jointly put themselves on the spot by agreeing to a joint budget resolution process, or by adopting other reforms that could increase transparency and political accountability for specific budget priorities?

ACTUAL “POLITICAL REALISM” IS MORE COMPLICATED

The short answer to that question is simple: because at some time they will jointly decide to change their behaviors. Given the *prima facie* validity of the institutional perspectives just described, that might seem to require a miracle, but there is no patron saint of budgets. So a longer answer is necessary to explain how standard predictions of institutional stability in budgeting will eventually be wrong.

Though the rationalist approach in political science has been tremendously influential in recent decades, it also has been heavily criticized for being a reductionist caricature of politicians (e.g., Green and Shapiro, 1996). Just as the image of *homo economicus* misses the facets of moral sentiments and altruistic actions, a similar self-interested *homo politicus* model neglects the motivations of public spiritedness and patriotism that can sometimes overwhelm short-term political calculations. This is why budget reform advocates are correct in emphasizing that it is the duty of elected officials to budget effectively, even if this argument can appear to be falling on deaf ears.

But we may not need to wait for a patriotic awakening, for the rationalist approach can also be used to predict that at certain times institutional change is possible. In 1977, Dodd suggested that when legislators believe that Congress has lost influence, they may pursue institutional reforms. In doing so, they will overcome their tendency to prefer the decentralization that empowers them as individuals, and instead prefer a centralization within Congress that could lead to a renewal of its influence, which would then result in increasing each legislator's individual power. The timing of when Dodd wrote this article was not accidental, as it followed adoption of the CBA in response to Nixon's aggrandizing behavior.

Dodd's argument rejects the metaphor that a critical juncture decision sends legislators down one fork in the road without an ability to reconsider their general direction. Instead, the metaphor is that of a cycle, in which the extents of legislative centralization and of institutional assertiveness vis-a-vis the President strengthen and weaken over time. So while path dependence may be useful, as Kay states, as an "empirical category; a concept which can be used

to label a certain type of temporal process” (2003, p. 406), it is not at all clear that this process is a universal one. Brown went farther in criticizing that line of reasoning:

That institutions are sticky and the policy tabula never rasa does not strike me as news, and so, try as I might, I get no intellectual buzz from a policy “model” maintaining, in essence, that social arrangements, once in place, tend to continue until something happens to make them change. If the arrangements in question are public programs, the political basics boil down pretty much as follows. Coalitions (perhaps aided and abetted by entrepreneurs and social movements) get legislation adopted at some point in time--amid circumstances that, incidentally, can always be construed with equal plausibility as contingent or not, depending on the theoretical or ideological perspective of the construer. Mass and elite expectations take place. Government agencies embrace, resist, or tolerate the program and develop standard operating procedures and perhaps a sense of ownership of the program. Interest groups that benefit become protective constituencies. “Iron triangles”--a concept that sounds something like lock-in to me--may solidify. Groups that bear monetary or other costs of the program may mobilize in opposition. Incrementalism (pulling and hauling at the margin) ensues and often persists. Supportive coalitions may crumble or erupt in conflict. Important events--scandals, recessions, bad publicity, and so on--may unsettle the status quo. The program in question survives, recoups, endures, shrinks, thrives, changes, or perhaps dies. It all depends (2010, p. 684; see also Howlett, 2009).

That saying “it all depends” is sometimes jokingly referred to as the first “law” of the social sciences. An interpretation of this “law” is that if enough important factors interact synergistically, then significant change to the budget process can occur, as shown by the adoption of the executive budget nearly a century ago. Congress passed the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 more than a decade after the Taft Commission’s recommendation, which became more convincing after the effects of World War I on the country’s finances (Meyers and Rubin, 2011).

Some other notable budget-related reforms include the creation of independent auditing, the executive Office of the President, the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, several phases of increased program analysis and performance management, the Congressional Budget Office, credit reform, and the recent moratorium on Congressional earmarks.⁶ The ban on earmarks is

⁶ On the frequency of major change, see Conlan, et. al., chapter 6.

unimaginable using rational or historical institutionalism assumptions, yet it is now in its fifth year--albeit, of course, with some leakage through surreptitious directives from Congress. It also seems unlikely that Congress will permanently refrain from all earmarking in the future. However, by this point it appears that there has been a permanent and significant reduction in the appropriators' powers. It is a nice illustration of what could be stated as the second "law" of social science: "expect the unexpected."

Among the other political scientists who have described how change can come suddenly, especially notable are Jones and Baumgartner, who borrowed Gould's concept of "punctuated equilibrium" in paleontology, where organisms tend to show up suddenly in the fossil record, be visible for long periods, and then disappear quickly. They conducted extensive empirical analysis of the distribution of changes in public policies, showing that while policies are usually very stable, when they change they tend to change substantially (1993).

It is very hard to predict when political conditions could become particularly favorable for major budget process reforms, such as through large turnover in Congress and/or election of a President who will lead on this issue.⁷ Research has shown, however, that though the timing of major change is often unpredicted, this does not mean that change occurs randomly. Change almost always results in substantial part from skillful advocacy that recognizes the complexity of creating change. For example, in Schickler's description of Congressional reforms, he found that a critical factor was that "entrepreneurial members build support for reform by framing proposals that appeal to groups motivated by different interests" (2001, p. 14). These advocates created majority coalitions from diverse members who found enough that was attractive in reform

⁷ See also Posner on crises, 2011.

packages to pass them. Over time, such compromises produce complicated institutions. A central finding of the “American political development” approach, summarized by Orren and Skowronek (2004), is that the desire to resolve conflicts produced by this history can then lead to additional changes in institutions.

The process through which politicians consider how to make those changes has been labeled “discursive institutionalism” by Schmidt. In this process, advocates produce change

by redefining interests as opposed to merely reflecting them in rationalist calculations, by reshaping historical paths as opposed to being shaped by them, or by recreating cultural norms as opposed to reifying them (2006, p. 12).⁸

They engage in “background ideation” to understand how institutions work, and use their “foreground discursive abilities” to

think, speak, and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, to deliberate about institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them (2008, p. 314).

This perspective about the discursive and ideational nature of institutional change is used in the remainder of this paper. Applying Kingdon’s logic of softening up, the paper next analyzes how advocates need to improve how they describe the potential instrumental effectiveness of proposed budget reforms. It then discusses how proposed budget process reforms could better match the goals that elected officials and constituents hold for the budget process. In doing so, the paper assumes that reform would follow a mix of the “expert” and “partisan” pathways postulated by Conlan, et. al. (2014). Given the complexity of the budget process, the details of that process have low public salience, leaving their design largely up to

⁸ Re the last phrase, Wildavsky’s incrementalism can be viewed as a form of sociological institutionalism that emphasized the roles of culturally-fixed norms.

experts. However, since the effects of that design can greatly affect how budgets allocate funds, partisan leaders will dominate negotiations over what goals the process will support.

DESCRIBING INSTRUMENTAL EFFECTIVENESS FOR PROPOSED REFORMS

Above I noted that reformers often use the word “must” when describing their preferred reforms as best practices, but they may also use this locution to indicate a low level of trust in elected officials. Related verbs used in support of budget reform proposals are “force” and “impose.” The right has long expressed a desire to impose constitutional constraints on politicians by means of a balanced budget amendment, while many deficit hawks hope that action could be forced through trigger mechanisms and related rules.

A significant challenge faced by the advocates of major reforms is that it can be hard to convince elected officials that the reforms will actually produce projected benefits--that the reforms will be “instrumentally effective.” In the case of the balanced budget constitutional requirement, one common doubt is whether the courts would have the capacity to constrain elected officials’ actions.⁹ In many cases, statutory triggers have not forced action because the Congress and the President cancelled the forcing by amending a law or rule. Given similar doubts and experiences, which exist for many proposed reforms, advocates need to develop convincing arguments about how reforms will work.

They would also be wise to avoid one connotation of “must”--which is that elected officials have little choice but to agree with a proposal that is supported with this imperative. It would be better to replace “must” phrasing with “if-then” phrasing that describes what

⁹ Another great impediment to passage is doubt about the desirability of an annually balanced budget given its pro-cyclical effect. Goal desirability is discussed in the next section.

mechanism(s) would create the claimed effect--e.g., by creating positive or negative incentives or by changing perceptions. Being as explicit as possible about hypothesized mechanisms would encourage better deliberation about whether they are likely to occur.

For example, returning to Reischauer's first suggestion, he did use the words "mechanism" and "incentives": "There must be some mechanism that incentivizes or forces policymakers to agree on a medium term – meaning 10 to 15 years – fiscal plan, one embodying a mainstream view of the desired fiscal path." The problem with this argument is that it mixes two potential causal effects. Given the difficulty with "forcing" that was just mentioned, reform advocates should drop this argument unless they can identify specific incentives that would truly compel politicians to act. Relying on only the latter half of his sentence, a clearer claim can be about the benefit of a medium-term perspective, such as: "if government were to agree on a target ratio for debt-to-gdp, then it could better decide in each year's budget how to attain this measure of financial sustainability." The mechanism of success from agreement on a debt goal could be that the complexity of the annual decision problem would be reduced, leaving "only" decisions on the specific budgetary changes that would move policy in the direction of the goal (which could be specified in a variety of ways besides setting a debt target).

Another concern held by elected officials is about the magnitude of change that is proposed--incremental reforms are more likely than major ones to be adopted because they are easier to imagine and are less likely to upset the status quo. Examples of incremental reforms can be found in the budget process chapter of the *Analytical Perspectives* volume of the President's budget. Some would require legislation while others could be adopted after informal negotiations with Congress. Yet even some of these proposed incremental reforms have yet to be

adopted, such as simplifying the unnecessarily complicated discretionary and mandatory classifications of spending on higher education assistance and transportation.

One successful attempt at major reform--the BEA's changes to accounting for credit programs--required years of study and advocacy, but this topic still inspires debates about what is the best practice. In 2011, the Republican side of the House Budget Committee (HBC) called for "fair-value accounting," an approach that its opponents describe as a significant departure from standard budget concepts. The HBC majority also proposed nine other reforms, most of which are seen as major. These would shift how budget projections are made and scored (long-term fiscal sustainability projections, a no-growth baseline for discretionary spending, and dynamic scoring), affect the timing of budget decisions (an automatic continuing resolution, biennial budgeting), involve the President more in the legislative budget process (joint budget resolution, expedited rescissions), and make budget reductions absent alternative actions (spending caps and automatic cuts, appropriation sunsets for new programs after seven years unless they were reauthorized).

The Bipartisan Policy Center has also proposed a list of major reforms.¹⁰ It would continue caps on discretionary spending, and add explicit budgets with new procedural controls for major mandatory programs and for tax expenditures. The government would set a public debt goal, and convert to a biennial process. Failure to adopt a budget resolution would automatically cancel congressional recesses, and failure to adopt appropriations bills by the beginning of the fiscal year would result in an automatic continuing resolution at the last year's level. The ambition of their list is moderated, however, in that while the group stated that one of

¹⁰ Rivlin and Domenici, 2015, with substantial contributions from G. William Hoagland.

its principles of reform was “budget decisions should have the active participation of the congressional leadership and the president,” it did not advocate a joint budget resolution. The group also said that

Addressing broadly the congressional committee structure is beyond the scope of this paper. However, simplifying the committee and subcommittee structure could be an integral part of improving both budgeting and governing in the U.S. Congress. (p. 11)

Describing the likely effects of major reforms is made difficult in part because sophisticated empirical tests of the effects of budget process mechanisms are rare. In today’s parlance about policy analysis, there are few “evidence-based” claims about the budget process. There are some exceptions: using other countries and states as cross-sectional samples, political scientists and economists have estimated the effects of specific, isolated institutional features, such as the extent of executive budgetary powers vis-a-vis the legislature. Yet these studies vary in the extent to which they recognize the complexity of how the studied features have developed and their interaction with other budget features; the less sophisticated studies are so reductionist that practitioners would be right to question their internal validity (see Meyers and Rubin, 2011; Andrews, 2010; Schick, 2004). Among the more sophisticated studies there is still a range of findings, due in part to different country samples and statistical identification strategies (e.g., see discussion in Debrun and Kumar, 2007). The greater problem for the application of the cross-national studies’ findings is that Congress is by far the most influential legislature in the world in its formal budgetary powers; similarly, Presidential powers are quite different from gubernatorial ones. Yet even if the social science case for external validity of cross-national studies is plausible to academics, most practitioners are very skeptical about arguments that Washington is not *sui generis* in all important respects.

Officials may also be skeptical because they have experience with similar reforms that haven't worked out exactly as promised. Consider the generic reform mechanism of "providing more information." The very reasonable assumption is that with more information, elected officials and their constituents will better understand current realities and possible future ones, and thus be more motivated to take action and to choose better policies. For example, extending the horizon of budget projections can provide useful information about risks that would otherwise be ignored by people who have strong incentives to focus myopically on the present, and limit gimmickry that would push reported budgetary costs into the period following the end of a short budgetary horizon.

In practice, most of the work of CBO supports these assumptions (Joyce, 2011a). Yet as Joyce has also noted, the availability of better budgetary information has not always persuaded politicians to change their behaviors (2008). A farther budgetary horizon has not eliminated gimmickry, as sponsors can still push costs beyond the end date or exploit loopholes within scoring horizons (e.g., creating funding cliffs that precede benefit expirations). In addition, longer horizons include more years for which uncertainties are greater, creating the risk that some recipients of this information place too much faith on point estimates that ignore the surrounding relevant ranges (which themselves may be very difficult to specify). Manski has called this behavior "budgeting with incredible certitude" (2013).

Claims about the potential effects of proposed budget reforms will be more convincing if advocates acknowledge criticisms of the proposed reforms and then explain why their proposed reforms are still viable. Sticking with informational reforms, consider the dynamic scoring approach that has been advocated by the right, with the goal of easing adoption of tax cuts given

their predicted growth-enhancing effects. The largest predicted effects, which are understandably featured by the proposal's advocates, are produced by models that assume that economic behaviors are significantly affected by assumptions about future economic conditions, including that federal budgets will be at sustainable levels. Behaviors in the alternative models, which show lower growth from tax cuts, are based more on observable, current economic conditions. Both proponents and opponents of dynamic scoring have the burden of convincing others that one projection approach is preferable to the other.

For other proposed reforms, the important uncertainties are often about how participants in the budget process will behave. For example, many perfunctorily dismiss the joint budget resolution because it is said to shift the power of the purse from Congress to the President, which Congress would never accept. This quick analysis is understandable given the natural conflict between the branches for relative power, but it is based on the false assumption that the budgetary power is solely held by the legislature. Since the President already has the constitutional right to veto bills and the delegated responsibility to prepare budget requests, any loss of Congressional power would be minimal.

Nor is the real potential of a joint budget resolution because of its statutory character. The branches could ignore this statute, for there is no workable "credible commitment" mechanism that would punish the branches for not adopting a joint budget resolution each year. Rather, the idea is that by adopting the process, both branches would commit to follow a process where they would be expected to negotiate and compromise. In other words, committing to a joint budget resolution process would be a pledge to reestablish a norm. At first, the potential penalty for not honoring the pledge could be a slight loss of reputation--having "named"

themselves would enable some “shaming” if they didn’t perform. On the other hand, if experience with the process built trust between the branches, the joint process would become institutionalized--a pattern of behavior widely expected to be followed.

Note that there is nothing to guarantee that an initial agreement on the joint budget resolution process will turn out this way--it is a contingent mechanism, the success of which is entirely dependent on the willingness to change norms. Here is another opportunity to use “if-then” argumentation. Politicians often complain about the failure to enact appropriations bills on time. The response from joint budget resolution advocates should be: “if you truly want to pass bills on time, then one way to move in this direction is to try to resolve conflicts over the budget totals earlier in the calendar year.”¹¹ If, on the other hand, politicians still want to hold out until the last minute--months after the fiscal year begins--then they should accept blame for creating these delays.

Another example of the need to better specify the mechanism of a proposed budget process reform is the biennial budget. As with almost all reforms, various pros and cons can be identified, which this paper will not explore in detail. The point is rather that the biennial budget is an old chestnut; it tends to reappear particularly after greater than average difficulty passing annual appropriations bills. If only we had to do that only every other year! Plus, we could use the off-year for other activities--such as program review, or campaigning for re-election. . . And that’s often the end of the discussion; left unstated is how well this reform would fit with the existing committee structure. It wouldn’t, for the appropriations committees would be taskless

¹¹ This is a strong argument for the situation in 2015, when both parties know that the discretionary caps are not politically sustainable but have yet to start negotiating over how to amend them. However, reaching agreement on this issue will not preclude other disputes from delaying adoption of bills, as shown by the controversy over funding Planned Parenthood.

for most of the off year, aside from the short time they would need to pass a supplemental.¹² If proponents of biennial budgeting are to be successful, they will need to admit that their favored reform would be a major change to the status quo. Convincingly describing the potential effectiveness of a proposed reform requires being clear about how it would be integrated with other parts of the process.

REBALANCING REFORM GOALS: THE TWO MISSING MIDDLES

Just as advocates must convincingly describe how proposed reforms will work, reforms will be accepted by elected officials only if they address goals for budgeting held by these officials. These goals relate to two “missing middles,” one of which is a challenge and one of which is an opportunity.

The first missing middle, which is the polarized distribution of partisan attachments, is widely recognized. Given the relatively few centrists in office and relatively few partisans from either party who are prone to compromise with their opposites, one strategic response is to push through reforms with the support of only one party in one branch. An example is the rule adopted by House Republicans in 2015 that creates a point of order against any bill reallocating a large amount of money from the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund (OASI) to the nearly-insolvent Disability Insurance Trust Fund (DI) that does not also improve the financial health of OASI (Rogers, 2015). Since the GOP is opposed to tax increases, its adoption of this rule places it at risk of political blame for large cuts to current DI benefits, if by 2016 Democrats

¹² It is true that they could conduct “oversight,” though the committees traditionally combine this activity with their review of annual budget requests; converting to a different form of oversight would make them even more like the authorizing committees.

do not agree to reductions in scheduled (but partially unfunded) future OASI benefits. When many Democrats have been arguing for expansion of Social Security benefits and increases in dedicated payroll taxes, and have the fallback of a simple reallocation of funds to DI, it is hard to imagine Democrats buckling in a Presidential election year.

As desirable as a compromise might be on this issue, there are not many examples of one party succeeding in forcing compromise through a would-be action-forcing rule. An alternative strategy is to try to rebuild a moderate coalition from the center out, though the 2010 attempt by Bowles and Simpson shows how difficult that is. In the next year, when some leaders of both parties explored compromising via the “Supercommittee,” their efforts were doomed by opposition from other party leaders, the dearth of ideological centrists within each party, and a lack of trust between the negotiators (Thurber, 2012).

Despite this last failure, the attempt to build a cross-party coalition that drew on the widely dispersed centers of both parties was, and is, the appropriate strategy. Each party has a sufficient presence in the separated institutions of American government to block proposals that they view as objectionable, which generally allows current policy to drift along. Unless the partisan balance shifts dramatically, which seems unlikely, cross-aisle bargains will be necessary to adopt policy and process changes.¹³

Turning now to the second “missing middle,” budget experts sometimes define macro, meso, and micro levels of goals for the budget process. One notable example is from Schick, writing for the World Bank Institute in 1998; his summary descriptions of these goals were:

Aggregate fiscal discipline: Budget totals should be the result of explicit, enforced decisions; they should not merely accommodate spending demands. These totals should

¹³ The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, aka the Ryan-Murray deal, is an example.

be set before individual spending decisions are made, and should be sustainable over the medium-term and beyond.

Allocative efficiency: Expenditures should be based on government priorities and on effectiveness of public programs. The budget system should spur reallocation from lesser to higher priorities and from less to more effective programs.

Operational efficiency: Agencies should produce goods and services at a cost that achieves ongoing efficiency gains and (to the the extent appropriate) is competitive with market prices (p. 2).

This conceptualization would not be persuasive to all elected officials. The efficiency phrasing for the micro level goal would be off-putting to the many who are more interested in where the money goes, and in who within which institution gets to decide that. Using those criteria, the current process is actually successful: it excels at clearly delineating who decides how much money goes where. Agency budgets are generally transparent, and elected officials have control over how expenditures will be made and receive accurate audit reports about how they were made.

Regarding the macro level, most elected officials agree with the principle of setting an enforceable budget target, but they also differ greatly over how flexible that target should be in response to the business cycle, whether the target should be for spending or for other budget aggregates such as the deficit, and on what levels of spending, taxing, and debt are sustainable over the long-run.

In debates over these macrobudgetary issues, debt hawks have bolstered their case by using “frames,” which are intended simplifications meant to focus attention on particular aspects of a situation. Often these frames have been hyperbolic, as may be seen in just the first few minutes of the debt hawk-funded movie *IOUSA*: the film’s title itself, growing deficits described

as a “fiscal cancer,” and the claim that “the most serious threat to the US is our own fiscal irresponsibility—not someone hiding in a cave” (the 2008 film predated Bin Laden’s death). They call for the exercise of self-denial against the temptations of deficits, in order to avert financial crises and reduce intergenerational inequities.

Another framing approach used by some debt hawks has been labeling their bills with contrived titles (a growing practice in Congress); for example, a bill that would set spending caps and automatically triggered spending reductions for the remarkably long span of four decades was called “The Balancing our Obligations for the Long-Term Act,” or “BOLT” act.¹⁴ It was not only the contents of this bill that was NUTS (“Not Using Triggers is Sensible” because no one can plausibly design automatic policy triggers that would work over such a long period). The bill title’s acronym didn’t send a compelling message, as “BOLT” doesn’t evoke an emotional reaction that should prompt support for the bill’s intent.

More generally, many of the frames intended to support macrobudgetary prudence have been too narrow in scope and too negative in tone. While those frames do appeal to those few who are especially concerned about the long-term and who are willing to sacrifice, it is a widely recognized fact of American politics that most citizens and most politicians have different preferences. Many are clearly concerned about the financial sustainability of the country, but they usually care more about the overall condition of the country and about their personal situations. They want to know how the budget’s allocations could improve those conditions. They don’t want to only *Fix the Debt*; they want to *Fix the Country* and *Fix Themselves*.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Veltman’s analysis of such “Congressional acronym abuse” at <http://noahveltman.com/acronyms/#summary>.

¹⁵ Fix the Debt is a budget hawk advocacy group. On public preferences, see, for e.g., Pew Research Center, 2015; Sides, 2015.

Attempts to reform the budget process would be more successful if proposed reforms stopped overemphasizing the long-term debt challenge, and responded more strongly to these preferences. That would require reforms that would increase the capacities to intelligently identify priorities, and to allocate resources to effective programs that would address these priorities.

Priority-setting and program reviews are an important feature of budget preparation in the executive branch, but not in the Congress, where it is the other “missing middle” of budgeting. While budget resolutions were once good-faith attempts to allocate resources, increased partisan polarization has converted them into documents that excel only at party positioning. The texts of budget committee plans are focus group-tested party platforms that use “words that work” rather than realistic plans for dividing up the government’s financial resources. Pseudo-allocations are made in budget resolutions through “deficit neutral reserve funds” for all and sundry favored causes, accompanied by the vote-a-rama amendment charade in the Senate.

Yet if elected officials actually wanted to use the existing process to set priorities, it wouldn’t be easy to do. This has been well-known since not long after the adoption of the CBA. Budget resolutions can’t effectively direct the allocation of funds across the range of various sectors of the budget (which are now known as “budget functions). This is due to the traditional jurisdictions of the appropriations and authorizing committees, which were not greatly affected by the CBA. Committee jurisdictions do not align well with the budget functions, and tax expenditures are usually not compared to similar spending programs. Appropriators can reallocate funds from the levels suggested in the budget resolution, and the authorizing committees often have similar flexibility under reconciliation (or reconciliation isn’t required of

them). Enforcement rules add to this separation between similar spending controlled by appropriators and authorizers. For example, the rule on “CHIMPs” (changes in mandatory programs) limits appropriators from legislating cuts in mandatory spending in order to offset increases in discretionary spending. This may reduce gimmickry, but it also protects mandatory spending from full competition with discretionary spending.

It might be argued that there is no need for a meso level of budgeting if micro and macro level procedures are adequate. Tight macro controls and the resulting competition for funds could put sufficient pressure on micro programs. And given the disdain for “planning” in America’s small government political culture, it may be too ambitious to hope that the U.S. government could budget strategically by setting priorities. On the other hand, with over 1000 budget accounts and about a fifth this number of tax expenditures, there is extensive overlap in how micro level budgets address meso level goals, which has been well documented by the Government Accountability Office. Federal budget experts have long argued that government needs to be more selective about its program efforts. Why wouldn’t it make more sense to periodically review how affordable micro programs are within their meso categories?

Perhaps the best way of illustrating the drawbacks of the existing system is by thinking about how we budget for health policy. It is widely agreed that health care spending drives projections of future deficits. For this policy area, “muddling through”--making incremental adjustments to reduce health spending from its projected growth and thus helping to meet the macro level budget goal--is not good enough, in two respects. First, most experts argue that “simply” limiting government health spending is insufficient; rather, additional systemic changes to the entire health sector of the economy, private as well as public, are needed. Second, fixating

on reducing costs while minimizing consideration of access and quality effects is not politically sustainable or good policy-making.¹⁶

THE POLITICS OF REBALANCING THE BUDGET PROCESS

Budget experts sometimes complain that when politicians find it too difficult to resolve budget disputes, they turn to talking about the process--though without much intent of actually changing the process. However, given that the first “missing middle” has almost guaranteed that a policy grand bargain won’t happen soon, adopting reforms that would eliminate the second “missing middle” may pay off over time. That will be the case if the two parties can be convinced to engage in a “fair fight” over priorities and allocations.

In another paper, I set out a comprehensive vision for improving the meso functions of federal budgeting (Meyers, n.d.). Its basic elements are as follows:

- highly-related programs and tax preferences would be grouped into policy sectors (somewhat like the current budget functions);
- technical experts would prepare periodic reports about current conditions in each sector and projections of likely developments;
- Congressional committees would be reorganized to match these policy sectors, combining the appropriations and authorizing processes;
- Congress and President would debate and adopt national strategies for each policy sector on a rotating schedule over a four year period;

¹⁶ Another good example is transportation. For years now the country’s focus has been on how to fill the financing gap in the highway trust fund, by using bizarre combinations of pay-fors, rather than on how to cost-effectively promote mobility.

- budget allocations would be made in light of detailed performance analyses of existing programs, and projections of how alternative programs might work; and
- committees would be guaranteed floor time to consider essential budget bills, and the minority would be guaranteed opportunities to amend each bill.

Redburn and Posner have presented a less ambitious, executive branch-focused version of this approach, one they label “budgeting for national goals” (2015; see also Posner and Redburn, 2011). As they describe, the statutory foundation is the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and its Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA). These laws require agency strategic plans, reporting on performance, and identification of agency and cross-agency priority goals. Presidential administrations have implemented many of their requirements, primarily as part of an executive branch management agenda. That focus includes recent actions; as Redburn and Posner state, “arguably, OMB missed an early opportunity in 2013 to leverage GPRAMA’s reformulate strategic planning requirements. . .” in relation to the budget (p. 15); its current emphasis is on quarterly reviews to sustain management attention to executive branch goals.

Three hurdles confront any effort to expand this reform approach to Congress. First, though Congress has legislated GPRA and GPRAMA, it has not widely and systematically used agency strategic plans and performance information. Second, since Congress lacks the secrecy, hierarchy, and one-party features of the executive branch budget process, it will have greater difficulty agreeing on budget priorities. Third, and most daunting, Congress is an exceptionally traditional institution, making it nearly unimaginable that it would agree to a fundamental reorganization of its committees and decision-processes.

On the other hand, and focusing on the latter hurdle, a modernization of Congress could benefit many legislators individually. While a modernization of Congress would create some losers, such as chairs-in-waiting, for many other legislators a modernized Congress would guarantee their influence. A committee reorganization could give each legislator membership on two committees with primary jurisdiction over major policy areas. On the House floor, minority members could have the right to offer a limited number of amendments rather than being shut out by closed rules, and committees could be assured of time to move their bills. In the Senate, the transition to this new approach would require filibuster reform; enough Senators would have to recognize that their descent into endless fights about when to schedule decisions has greatly damaged its desired reputation as an effective (forget “the world’s greatest”) deliberative body. Returning to Dodd’s argument, these reforms would allow each legislator to enjoy a share of the increased influence of a Congress that is no longer dysfunctional.

Empirical political science on how power is wielded in Congress has long centered on the balance between committees and parties. For the last two decades, especially in the House, parties and their leaderships have dominated (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). The appropriations committees have lost much influence, suggesting that a reorganization that would combine appropriating and authorizing functions is not so far fetched if the parties will benefit from new arrangements. The organizing principle that they could endorse would be that committees should especially serve two roles: (1) as specialists, gathering information about complicated policy issues; and (2) as representatives of the respective parties, debating and then deciding issues that need not come to the floor.¹⁷

¹⁷ Political scientists will recognize this normative model as consistent with the theory of Krehbiel, 1991.

The committees would be the first venue for the “fair fight.” The ideologies of their members would resemble the floor--mostly strong conservatives and strong liberals, who argue that their respective small government and big government ideologies are correct. In a reformed budget process that took priority setting and allocation seriously, it is more likely that these assertions would be put to the test. Periodic sector reviews would incorporate more technical expertise into the process.¹⁸ Grouping like programs and tax preferences together would make their costs and benefits more transparent and procedurally easier to modify. Deficit hawks should especially value this “level playing field” effect because it would encourage more competition between claimants for funds.

Of course, grouping all similar programs and tax preferences into a sector would not eliminate all current differences between procedurally favored and unfavored programs. For example, it is hard to imagine that Social Security would lose its framed status as a “trust fund.” Various work on the “children’s budget” has suggested that the opportunity cost of a supposedly untouchable program is substantial government underinvestment in effective interventions early in life. With a functioning meso level of the budget process, it would be easier to find such “opportunity benefits,” and for politicians to claim credit for reallocating funds to produce them.

This would not mean that making choices about priorities across committees and across sectors of the budget would be easy--far from it. This confession is consistent with the advice above that criticisms of proposed reforms be taken seriously. One method of making this approach more viable would be to require the annual preparation of a State of the Nation report that would collate important available data on conditions that are important to Americans. In the

¹⁸ For example, the administration would be required to prepare Quadrennial Reviews for all departments, which are now prepared just for DoD, State, Homeland Security, and Energy.

spring, Congress could then hold an extended debate on the state of the nation. This would give legislators a higher platform from which to present a competing vision to the President's State of the Union speech, and in turn allow the President's supporters to back up the many promises made in that speech. It would provide a more informed basis for deliberation over budget totals that could be agreed to in a joint budget resolution.

CONCLUSION

Political institutions, by definition, are very difficult to change. This is only slightly less the case when they are failing at their official purposes, for they may be carrying out other functions that some politicians greatly value. Federal budgeting has not routinely produced agreements on high quality plans for use of the government's limited financial resources, but even so it provides ample opportunities for ideological posturing and partisan combat.

Perpetual pessimism about this frustrating situation is not justified. The silver lining is based on the fact that for more than a century, budget experts have agreed that a well-designed budget process can have substantial benefits. When they can convince politicians that these benefits are preferable to the effects of current practices, and describe workable mechanisms that would produce these benefits, then politicians are more likely to enact needed reforms.

The benefit that many experts have stressed in recent years is keeping the government's finances in a sustainable position. While this should not be the only goal for budgeting, it is obviously very important, given the risks from the combined effects of demographics, program designs, and political aversion to taxation. To reach it in part requires an informational strategy

of making budget projections that are far-sighted, but reasonably so in light of unavoidable uncertainties about the future.

Also needed are institutional arrangements that would prudently use this information. For many experts who perceive excessive government debt and who think about political institutions by emphasizing how interests and incentives drive (mis)behavior, the appropriate institutional response is to create new rules. One variant of this approach has been calling for the exogenous constraint of a constitutional amendment that would require an annually balanced budget, but this has never received a sufficient number of votes to be sent to the states. The other approach has been to create rules that might force adoption of specific policies, or at least could signal a commitment by politicians to engage in endogenous self-control.

In any budget process, rules are essential, but some current rules contribute to problems with the process. Notably, if the cap and sequestration rules adopted in 2011 are followed as scheduled in law, discretionary spending would fall far below the level needed to finance the government that most Americans want. For the second time, the first being the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 (aka Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, or GRH), though some had hoped that a ceiling and sequester mechanism on discretionary spending would force politicians to adopt savings in mandatory spending, it hasn't happened.

GRH was replaced in 1990 by the BEA, which made major deficit reductions, and which also strengthened rules for separately controlling discretionary and mandatory spending, based on the traditional committee jurisdictions that were preserved by the CBA. These jurisdictions and associated rules limit how Congressional budgeting can be used to identify national priorities and then move funds to cost-effective approaches that address those priorities.

A rebalancing of the budget process reform agenda that would reemphasize how budgeting can better serve these allocational purposes could also make that agenda more politically feasible. This is based on the assumption that in a time when opinions about government policies are highly polarized, politicians should want to express their differences in a series of “fair fights.” These would be scheduled in part by rearranging the budget process so that programs with related goals would regularly be compared to each other. This approach could simultaneously promote fiscal sustainability.

To be clear, the approach here is not that reforms would somehow force politicians to do this. Reforms depend on acceptance of ideas about what goals are desirable and how those goals can be attained. Advocates of reforms need to convince politicians they should voluntarily experiment with reforms, by describing how the reforms could effectively create results that politicians should value. If these projections are accurate, then these positive experiences will create new norms. Major reforms that were once viewed as pipe dreams then become essential--for example, no one seriously thinks that Congress should return to the practices that preceded adoption of the executive budget process.

Some past reforms like this thus offer grounds for optimism about the future. One reason for their success is that they were strongly related to institutional expectations. Having the President involved in budgeting was widely accepted because it matches the constitutional structure of separated institutions sharing powers. This idea should likewise support the idea of a joint budget resolution. Similarly, improving how the budget could allocate funds could revitalize the representative and deliberative functions of Congress that are central to its identity (Dodd, 1993).

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that Congress is often reluctant to reform itself. This has led some advocates to prefer incremental changes that have a greater potential of being adopted now. In contrast, the approach to political feasibility here takes a longer but still realistic perspective. This is necessary if a broken “regular order” is to be replaced with a modernized and effective one.

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