

Comments on receiving the Aaron Wildavsky Award from the
Association for Budgeting and Financial Management, October 5, 2018

Roy T. Meyers

Thanks for that introduction, Phil. You have done it all in our field, always with level-headed wisdom and good humor, so it is an honor to receive this award from you.

I have many people to thank. They include many of you in the field of public budgeting and finance whose work has taught me so much. I say without an ounce of false humility that there are other scholars in this group who have been more productive and insightful than I have been, and who deserve to receive this award in the coming years. But I certainly appreciate the recognition that my work has had some merit, and I am thankful to be in the company of the previous award winners I greatly admire.

That I am receiving an award named after Aaron Wildavsky is a bit ironic, given that my dissertation sought to develop an alternative to

incrementalism that better fit the budgeting politics I was observing while working at the Congressional Budget Office. The Politics of the Budgetary Process was one of my favorite books as an undergraduate, but I had no intention of researching budgets when I moved to Washington as an ABD PhD student. But the 1980 election results killed my plan to work on a committee, and then I lucked into an internship at CBO.

Years later, as I was preparing to leave CBO, I sent Wildavsky a working paper on how “pay-as-you go” might and might not work, before that process was adopted in the Budget Enforcement Act. He kindly called me up, praised the piece, and said that I belonged in academia, which was a morale booster. I will confess, though, that after reading the piece, an influential staff member of Ways and Means also felt that I belonged in academia! A chapter I drafted for a report on supplemental appropriations, which suggested that Congress overused the process, elicited a similar reaction from the Chief Clerk of the House Appropriations Committee.

We ended up releasing that report without any substantive changes. I am among the many CBO staffers who have benefited from the strong backbones of CBO's Directors and other leaders. Starting with Alice Rivlin, and including my former boss Marvin Phaup, they have set the standard for speaking truth to power, the title of one of Wildavsky's many books. That is an especially important practice now, when CBO's professionalism has been denigrated by partisan hacks such as Mick Mulvaney. It's a tragedy that this term applies, accurately, to the Director of OMB.

When I have wanted to use as neutral a word as possible to describe what has happened during the Trump administration, I have settled on "abnormal." In general, though, I think that's too polite a word to apply to the outrageous violations of numerous valuable norms that I and many other Americans hold dear.

Norms were central to Wildavsky's theory of budgeting, and to his cultural theory of society. And while I have been less attracted to incrementalist norms than Wildavsky was, like him I believe that norms should be central to our understanding of budgeting and to our professional activities.

For more than a century, the cultural role of people like us has been to advocate for better methods of public budgeting and finance, and attempt to protect useful norms when politicians, political parties, interest groups, and the public would weaken or destroy them.

In my opinion, among the successes in this effort in the U.S. are reasonably well-functioning credit markets for munis and treasuries, generally honest budget execution, and greater budget transparency than in many other countries.

In contrast, we have a dysfunctional federal budget process--the topic that has interested me the most--which often does not intelligently

allocate scarce resources in order to solve problems and create opportunities. It fails to educate citizens well about budgetary tradeoffs. And current medium-term projections show that fiscal sustainability is a distant prospect.

Our current “leaders” have enacted laws that significantly increase the deficit despite the economy’s very strong condition, and have reincarnated the supply-side lie that tax cuts won’t reduce revenues. They further muddied up the federal tax code with many inefficient and inequitable provisions. The only good news here is at least the feds do not impose a sales tax that they could similarly screw up--though if we had one, I would look forward to Mikesell’s analysis of its flaws.

So there is no lack of problems that we can address through normative argumentation and empirical research. There are many different methods that we use for the latter, and each has its rightful place. But I want to call for more in-depth qualitative research of the federal government. Over the years, I have learned much from Irene Rubin,

based on her extensive interviewing with state and local budgeteers. As a field, I don't think we do enough close observation of federal budgeting and exploration of the insider knowledge held by its practitioners.

A model here is the case study co-authored by Fred Thompson on the Air Force Material Command (Fred's work always has made me rethink my assumptions). I have former students in important budgeting positions in a number of federal agencies, and they have many interesting things to say about what they do, especially now. I hope some younger scholars will start interviewing practitioner experts like them.

Finally, I think that as a field, we need to put more effort into how we can convince politicians to budget better, rather than have our work fall on deaf ears, as it often does. While human myopia and overly partisan behavior will continue to challenge us, if we think harder about how political self-interest can be harnessed to promote the public interest, we

might be more likely to transform our recommendations about best practices for public budgeting and finance into politically realistic proposals.

Thank you very much.