



Insight

Hope for Bicameral Budget Process Reform?

GORDON GRAY | NOVEMBER 22, 2019

Reforming the congressional budgeting process has seemed a cursed endeavor. Last year Congress came close to reforming how legislators exercise the power of the purse, but that effort [ultimately came up short](#). A review of recent congressional reform committees, such as those formed to address the federal debt or multiemployer pensions, is not replete with success stories. But members and staff put time and effort into these ventures, and—even when they fail to arrive at legislation—many are still invested in the policies and processes involved. Two recent reform efforts in the Senate and the House indicate that these recent efforts might yet produce fruit.

The Senate Budget Committee recently reported out an ambitious, bipartisan [reform package](#). It is unclear when or if the measure will get a vote on the Senate floor, but the Senate nevertheless appears to be taking budget process reform seriously.

The House of Representatives is in on this effort, too. Representatives Tim Burchett, a Republican from Tennessee, and Ed Case, a Democrat from Hawaii, have introduced their own reform effort that might form the basis for a worthwhile compromise. The RAFT Act (Reforming America's Fiscal Toolkit) of 2019 is not a sweeping rewrite of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 in the same vein as the Senate Budget Committee bill. But it need not be to make a meaningful contribution to this effort. Instead the Act includes two fast-track legislative procedures that might encourage legislators to take the hard votes needed to reduce the nation's appetite for borrowing.

Similar to the Senate proposal as well as a proposal from Representatives William Timmons (R-SC) and Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), the Act would require the [budget resolution](#) to include a debt-to-GDP target. In even-numbered years, the budget resolution would be required to include one of two pathways for meeting the debt target: fast track procedures similar to [reconciliation](#) or a bicameral, bipartisan commission that can report fiscal policy changes, not unlike "[the Super Committee](#)" that was convened in 2011.

Under the first pathway, authorizing committees would receive instructions from the budget resolution to recommend and report policy changes needed to the debt-to-GDP target. The Budget Committee would then report the combined bill, and the House and Senate would consider the bill under expedited procedures and require a simple majority for passage in a process virtually identical to reconciliation.

Under the second pathway, Congress would convene a bicameral committee, with equal representation from the majority and minority parties, that could recommend changes in law to comport with the debt target in the budget resolution. If a supermajority of this committee agreed on reform package, it would be considered in the House and Senate under expedited procedures.

Compared to the broader reform package that was contemplated by last year's budget process committee and the Senate reform proposal, the RAFT Act and similar measures offer more modest improvements on this budget process. But the inclusion of the debt target, a new reconciliation process, and a bipartisan alternative is strikingly similar to provisions in the Senate reform proposal, which suggests that there may be enough bipartisan interest to see these reforms become law. Perhaps budget process reform isn't cursed after all.