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EXAMINING THE CASE FOR BIENNIAL BUDGETING

Casey Burgat

INTRODUCTION

To the frustration of members and citizens alike, Congress has regularly failed to adhere to the budget process and deadlines outlined in the 1974 Congressional Budget Act (CBA).¹ In fact, the legislative body has not successfully finalized work on all of its appropriations bills on time since 1996.²

Rather than to execute annual appropriations legislation as required in the CBA, the breakdown of the budget process has resulted in increasing reliance on short-term budget resolutions, often accompanied by a drama-filled debt crisis and the threat of (or an actual) government shutdown. After each passage of these manufactured crises, only one conclusion inevitably results: the congressional budget process is broken.

1. P.L. 112-25

2. Jessica Tollestrup, *Biennial Budgeting: Options, Issues, and Previous Congressional Action*, Congressional Research Service, Feb. 2, 2015. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41764.pdf>.

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Causes for the dysfunction are many. Ideological polarization between and within the parties are clear drivers. In practice, modern budget proposals put forth by political parties better resemble partisan wish lists and campaign messaging documents than serious negotiation starters toward bipartisan agreement. Genuine disagreements on spending levels and priorities, sticky congressional budgeting rules, harsh time constraints for members and a never-ceasing focus on upcoming election messaging are also to blame for the budget process breakdown.

Even more fundamentally, the vast programmatic, spending and oversight considerations required of the budget process are argued to be too numerous, repetitive and rushed to be effectively executed on an annual cycle.³ As a result, if taken up at all, appropriations measures are routinely delayed and are written by party leaders instead of through a committee-driven process. Consequently, budget resolutions often fund the government only for weeks or months rather than a full fiscal year.

In response to widespread concerns that the federal budget process is too political, time-consuming, inefficient and does not allow for adequate congressional oversight of spending, many budget experts have advocated for the adoption of a two-year, or biennial, budgeting framework. The potential change has a long history, both legislative and theoretical, and has attracted advocates and opponents inside and outside of Congress. Despite its long history, however, no consensus on its likely outcomes has emerged. While many biennial budget proponents contend that many ills of the current process could be alleviated by lengthening the operation to a two-year budgeting cycle, critics are less sure.

3. Testimony of Alice M. Rivlin, House Committee on the Budget, "Does Biennial Budgeting Fit in a Rewrite of the Budget Process?", 114th Congress, November, 2015. <http://budget.house.gov/uploadedfiles/rivlintestimony.pdf>.

Although many critics agree that transitioning the congressional budget cycle in this manner is likely to allow for better agency and program planning, they also fear that a biennial process would likely result in several negative consequences. These include a potential reduction in Congress' opportunity to influence programs and policies that receive federal funds, and a likely increase in the reliance on supplemental appropriations that become necessary due to changing economic and political circumstances that occur within a longer budgeting period.

While no expert consensus has emerged on the likely effects, what is clear is that the adoption of a federal biennial framework would do little to solve or lessen the underlying political incentives and spending disagreements that have exacerbated the breakdown in the current process. In fact, although two-year budgets may provide an opportunity for more deliberation for funding decisions, the longer period for which agencies and programs are funded will only raise the stakes of the initial decisions. Consequently, budgeting choices will likely only serve to increase conflict between the parties. Additionally, despite the potential for more time for members to conduct more rigorous spending oversight and evaluation under a two-year cycle, there is no guarantee that they would take advantage of the opportunity. And, given the harsh time constraints lawmakers face, biennial budgeting advocates are likely overestimating the time members will commit to these purposes. Ultimately, although there may be some advantages to a biennial framework, it is hardly a panacea that will fix the dysfunctional congressional budget process. With that said, experiments with biennial budgeting in other legislatures and agencies, along with suggestions from lawmakers and budget experts, have produced some best practices that should be incorporated into any serious proposal to enact such a framework at the federal level.

BIENNIAL BUDGETING: AN OVERVIEW

Whereas currently the federal budget calls for annual appropriations, biennial, or multi-year, budgeting is the “practice of preparing and adopting budgets for two-year periods rather than a single fiscal year.”⁴ However, because federal budgeting entails numerous and often independent considerations—such as authorization and appropriations measures—the establishment of a two-year budget cycle can take on a myriad of configurations.

Frameworks

The most common biennial budgeting framework calls for budget and appropriation bills to be considered and enacted in odd-numbered years (the first year of each Congress) and

programmatic spending evaluations and oversight to be conducted in even-numbered ones.⁵ This approach is referred to as “split sessions” biennial budgeting and such a method is argued to increase congressional program and agency oversight. This is because the budget and spending decisions are completed in year one, which allows the second year of the session to be entirely devoted to their evaluation.⁶

A second framework, known as the “stretch” approach, simply extends the current budget process to a two-year period.⁷ Proponents of this approach contend that the two-year process allows more time and consideration of budget resolutions.⁸ They also argue that it reduces the need for repetitive voting, as spending bills are only passed once for the entire congressional session.⁹ Other framework variations include: one- or two-year budget resolutions, one- or two-year appropriations, and various deadlines for reporting requirements by federal agencies and programs.

History

Biennial budgeting has long been of interest as a potential way to reform increasing budgetary difficulties, both from within and outside of Congress. Accordingly, numerous think-tank and academic budget experts have offered their varying opinions and recommendations on the subject across a wide range of formats.¹⁰

Additionally, biennial budgeting has been studied by several commissions and committees tasked with offering recommendations on how best to reform congressional operations and budgeting, among other topics. In 1984, for example, the Pearson-Ribicoff Commission, formally known as the Study

5. For an example, see, H.R. 1610, Biennial Budgeting and Enhanced Oversight Act of 2015, 114th Congress.

6. Roy T. Meyers, “Biennial Budgeting by the U.S. Congress,” *Public Budgeting & Finance* 8:2 (1988), pp. 21-32.

7. Deadline dates for congressional and executive actions, however, vary considerably.

8. Congressional Budget Office, “Biennial Budgeting,” p. 31. <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/ftpdocs/84xx/doc8482/87-cbo-002.pdf>.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

10. See, e.g., Rudolph G. Penner and Alan J. Abramson, *Broken Purse Strings: Congressional Budgeting 1974-88* (Urban Institute Press, 1988), pp. 116-17; Jason J. Fichtner et al., “Biennial Budgeting: A Look at Intent vs. Potential Outcomes,” Mercatus Center, March 2016. <https://www.mercatus.org/system/files/Fichtner-Biennial-Budgeting-MOP-v1.pdf>; Patrick Louis Knudsen, “An Analysis of Selected Budget Process Reforms,” *The Heritage Foundation Discussion Paper* No. 16, April 11, 2014, pp. 9-12. http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/pdf/cpidp016.pdf; Alice M. Rivlin and Pete V. Domenici, “Congressional budget process is broken, drastic makeover needed,” *The Brookings Institution*, July 27, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/congressional-budget-process-is-broken-drastic-makeover-needed/>; Mark Strand and Anca Butcaru, “Everyone Seems to Want It So What Is the Hold-Up on the Biennial Budget?,” *Congressional Institute*, Oct. 11, 2016. <http://conginst.org/2016/10/11/everyone-seems-to-want-it-so-what-is-the-hold-up-on-the-biennial-budget/>; and Testimony of Scott Lilly, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress, House Committee on Rules, Subcommittee on Legislative and Budget Process, “Biennial Budgeting Would Be a Setback in Efforts to Reform Congressional Budgeting,” 113th Congress, June 25, 2014. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Lilly-EconTestimonyFINAL2.pdf>.

4. Congressional Budget Office, “Biennial Budgeting,” *U.S. Congress Staff Working Paper*, Nov. 1987, p. 3. <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/ftpdocs/84xx/doc8482/87-cbo-002.pdf>.

Group on Senate Practices and Procedures, recommended that half of the appropriations bills should be considered in each of the two years of a congressional session, which is a variation of the stretch model.¹¹ More recently, the 2011 Peterson-Pew Commission on Budget Reform suggested multi-year budgets should be accompanied with “enforceable debt reduction targets that remain in place until and unless subsequent laws are enacted to change either the path or the means of accomplishing [the debt targets].”¹²

Within Congress, a number of hearings have been held on budget process reform, including some specifically devoted to the topic of biennial budgeting. Most recently, on November 18, 2015, the House Committee on the Budget held a hearing entitled, “Does Biennial Budgeting Fit in a Rewrite of the Budget Process?” at which two sitting Representatives, two academics, and former Office of Management and Budget (OMB) director and current Brookings Institution Senior Fellow, Alice Rivlin, testified on the advantages and obstacles to the implementation of biennial budgeting.¹³ The Senate Committee on the Budget held a similar hearing on November 4, 2015.¹⁴

Legislation that provides for the implementation of a biennial budgeting cycle dates back to the 97th Congress when Sen. Dan Quayle (R-Ind.) introduced the “Budget and Oversight Reform Act of 1981.”¹⁵ Since that time, various biennial budgeting bills have been introduced in every Congress since the 105th (1997-1998). In the current session, two have been introduced. Sen. Johnny Isakson’s (R-Ga.) “Biennial Budgeting and Appropriations Act,” which incorporates a “stretch” framework;¹⁶ and Rep. Luke Messer’s (R-Ind.) “Biennial Budgeting and Enhanced Oversight Act of 2017,” which calls for a “split-session” approach. It also creates a point of order in both chambers “against authorizations of appropriations that do not include specific authorizations covering at least each fiscal year in one or more bienniums.”¹⁷ To date, both bills have been referred to committee and have received no further action.

11. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, *Report of the Study Group on Senate Practices and Procedures*, 98th Congress, S. Prt. 98-242 (Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 21.

12. “Eyes on the Horizon: Multi-Year Budgeting and its Role in the Federal Budget Process,” Peterson-Pew Commission on Budget Reform, December 13, 2011. <http://budgetreform.org/document/eyes-horizon-multi-year-budgeting-and-its-role-federal-budget-process.html>.

13. House Committee on the Budget, “Does Biennial Budgeting Fit in a Rewrite of the Budget Process?”, 114th Congress, Nov. 18, 2015. <https://budget.house.gov/hearing/biennial-budgeting-fit-rewrite-budget-process>.

14. Senate Committee on the Budget, “A Biennial Approach to Better Budgeting,” 114th Congress, Nov. 4, 2015. <https://www.budget.senate.gov/hearings/a-biennial-approach-to-better-budgeting>.

15. S. 2008, Budget and Oversight Reform Act of 1981, 97th Congress

16. S. 306, Biennial Budgeting and Appropriations Act, 115th Congress

17. H.R. 1065, Biennial Budgeting and Enhanced Oversight Act of 2017, 115th Congress

ADVANTAGES

Advocates of biennial budgeting argue that implementing some form of a two-year budget cycle will likely result in several advantages. The most commonly cited benefits typically relate to an increase in the amount of time available for lawmakers to consider spending decisions more carefully and to lessen the number of repetitive votes required by the annual cycle. In the words of former OMB director, Jack Lew:

The current process does not service us well. It is very inefficient, and the task of budgeting consumes a great deal of time and energy that could be better devoted—by the Congress, the President, and the agencies—to addressing programmatic issues from a longer-term and more in-depth perspective.¹⁸

Proponents also contend that voting on budgetary matters once in each congressional session would potentially reduce the number of government shutdown-related events because the budget would be fixed for the entire two-year congressional term, rather than by the short-term continuing resolutions that have become commonplace.

A second potential primary advantage of biennial budgeting is that it may allow for more time to be devoted to congressional oversight of federal government spending at the agency and program levels, particularly under the “split-session” framework where budgetary questions are decided only in the first year of each Congress. After funding levels are set, Congress is free to devote the second term to programmatic and spending evaluations, thereby ensuring that federal dollars are put to their most effective use.¹⁹ Proponents also argue that this arrangement will increase the importance of authorizing committees because they would be in a stronger position to influence policy with longer-term budgeting decisions.²⁰

Finally, biennial advocates cite that the two-year budgets would result in several benefits for agencies and programs that receive federal funds. To reduce the number of budget decisions would save time creating, editing and justifying funding levels with relevant committees. This would allow better agency planning and budgeting, as well as provide them more time to evaluate their own spending. Additionally, multi-year budgets would provide federal fund recipients more stability in budgeting and spending decisions, as

18. Testimony of Director, Office of Management and Budget, Jacob J. Lew, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress (GPO: March 2000), pp. 124-44. https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/legislative_testimony_20000310.

19. Testimony of Maya MacGuineas, President, Center for a Responsible Federal Budget, House Committee on Rules, Subcommittee on Legislative and Budget, “H.R. 1869, The Biennial Budgeting and Enhanced Oversight Act,” 113th Congress, June 25, 2014. http://crfb.org/sites/default/files/6_25_testimony_macguineas-final_0.pdf.

20. Testimony of Senator Wendell H. Ford, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, “S. 1434—The Biennial Budgeting Act of 1995,” 104th Congress (GPO, 1996).

compared to a single-year appropriation. The increases in time and stability may, in turn, allow agencies to commit more resources to the execution of policies and priorities.²¹

CRITICISMS

Given that biennial budgeting has been offered as a potential reform for nearly forty years without federal passage, it should come as no surprise that there are also numerous concerns regarding its adoption. First, critics regularly contend that budget decisions made for the entirety of a two-year congressional term are far less accurate due to the inherently uncertain and complex task of economic forecasting. Within a biennial framework, these difficulties are likely to be exacerbated given the longer period in which changing political and economic circumstances may occur, as well as how far in advance the budgets would have to be crafted. For example, common biennial legislation calls for agencies to begin creating their budget requests at least 28 months before the second year of the congressional term and at least 40 months before the second year ends.²² As articulated by former Congressional Budget Office (CBO) analyst, Philip Joyce:

The federal government has a rather checkered history of budget forecasting. To produce a budget every two years would increase the probability that it would be based on erroneous information, and would therefore need to be redone. The biennial process may degenerate into an annual process, given the uncertainties associated with budgeting for a \$4 trillion enterprise.²³

To make up for inevitably incorrect forecasts or changed funding priorities,²⁴ critics argue there will be increased need for supplemental funding legislation.²⁵ Further, supplemental funding bills are typically written more haphazardly, under increased direction of congressional leadership, and without as much opportunity for input or scrutiny by rank-and-file members and observers. In instances where supplemental legislation is not undertaken to correct for changing circumstances, critics worry that Congress will delegate

more spending authority to the president and federal agencies, which would effectively outsource spending decisions from the legislative to the executive branch. In such instances, the funding process may actually become less accountable under the biennial framework.

A second caution put forth by budget experts is that the level and impact of congressional oversight may actually decrease under biennial budgeting. This is likely to occur for at least two reasons. First, there is no guarantee that members would commit the second year of each Congress to spending evaluations and oversight. After all, members face notoriously harsh time constraints and have no shortage of items that require their attention. And because spending battles are naturally political—especially when a reduction of funding for government programs is a potential outcome—lawmakers may be inclined to spend less of their time on issues of oversight. Second, some experts argue that the single-year funding cycle may provide lawmakers with the best forum for oversight simply because the “most practical oversight is accomplished through the appropriations process when the agencies are dependent on Congress for more funding in the near term.”²⁶ If their funding levels are fixed for longer periods of time, agencies may become less inclined to respond promptly to oversight requests.

Finally, critics caution that a biennial framework may actually raise the level of conflict within budgeting decisions, as well as the likelihood of last-minute brinkmanship, because the results will last longer. In short, because spending decisions will be set for two years—until the next congressional election—members will view the appropriations process as the only opportunity to message voters in the form of spending priorities. Former Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Committee Rep. David Obey (R-Wisc.) has argued that adopting two-year budgets “will mean that people will be less willing, not more willing to compromise and in the end that means that the debate on the budget is likely to spill over into the second year and all we’ve done is to lengthen rather than shorten our budget fights.”²⁷ Such dynamics may result in more intense budget disagreements that likely continue to occur at or near budget deadlines, which would do little to subvert the frustrations produced by the current budgeting process.

21. Testimony of Former Director, Office of Management and Budget, Leon E. Panetta, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress (GPO, 2000), pp. 325-39.

22. Richard Kogan, “Four Reasons Not to Move to Biennial Budgeting,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 2, 2013. <http://www.cbpp.org/blog/four-reasons-not-to-move-to-biennial-budgeting>.

23. Testimony of Professor, University of Maryland, Philip G. Joyce, House Committee on the Budget, “The Broken Budget Process: Perspectives from Budget Experts,” 112th Congress, Sept. 22, 2011. http://budget.house.gov/uploadedfiles/joyce_testimony9222011.pdf.

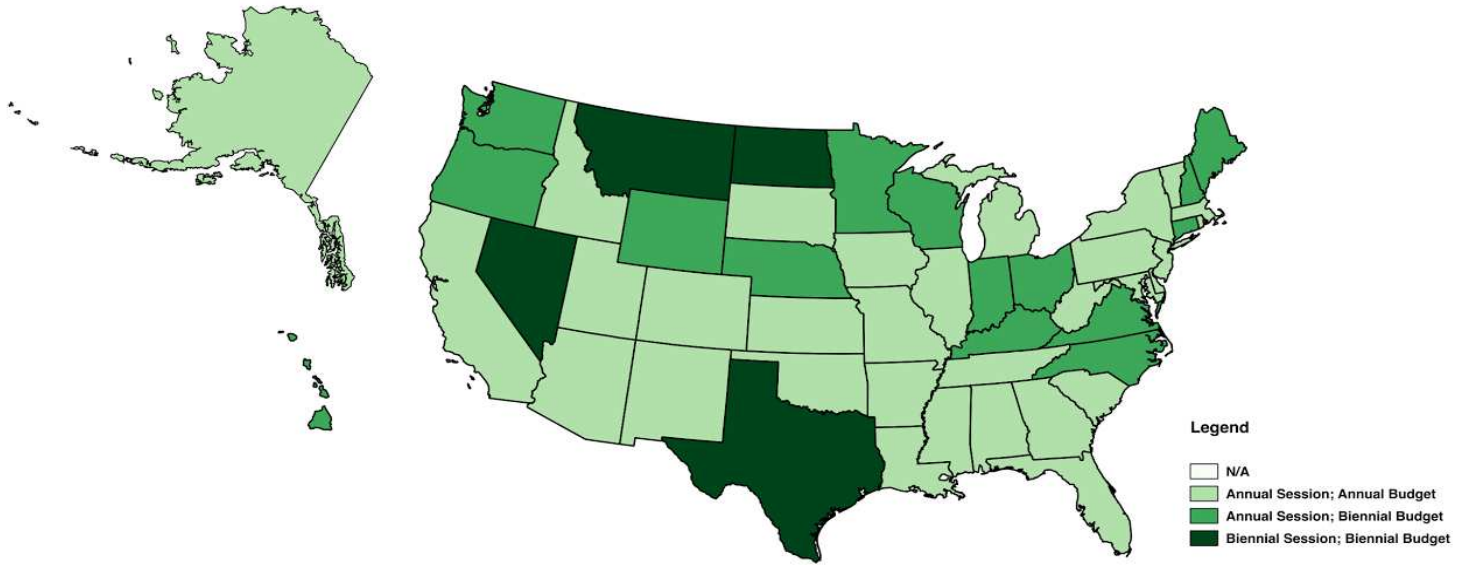
24. These can happen due to policy shifts or because of other unforeseen but pressing funding needs (e.g., natural disasters).

25. Patrick Louis Knudsen, “An Analysis of Selected Budget Process Reforms,” *Center for Policy Innovation Discussion Paper* No. 16, April 11, 2014, pp. 9-12. http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/pdf/cpidp016.pdf.

26. Statement of Representative Joe Knollenberg, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress (GPO, 2000), pp. 68-73.

27. Statement of Representative David Obey, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress (GPO, 2000), pp. 37-59.

FIGURE I: ANNUAL VS. BIENNIAL BUDGETS BY STATE



SOURCE: Ronald K. Snell, "State Experiences with Annual and Biennial Budgeting."

BIENNIAL BUDGETING IN PRACTICE

State Experiences

Budget experts and lawmakers often look to state experiences with various biennial budgeting frameworks in an attempt to anticipate their effects should Congress shift to a two-year arrangement. Strikingly, there has been a clear move away from biennial budgeting in favor of an annual process. In 1940, 44 states used two-year budgets. As of 2011, only 19 states do.²⁸ The shift is argued to be at least partially because of increases in state populations; more state legislatures that meet annually; bigger, more complicated, and more volatile state budgets; and increased federal funding to state programs.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of states that adhere to annual budgeting frameworks as of 2011. It is worth noting that eight of the ten most populous states use annual appropriations, which lends credence to the criticism that larger states with bigger budgets and more programs feel better served by an annual process. This is ostensibly because more regular spending decisions, evaluations and oversight can occur. Conversely, less populous states and those with biennial legislatures are more likely to make use of a less frequent model.

Despite the stark trend toward annual budgeting, no consensus has emerged as to its overall utility at the state level. One

report that examined outcomes between states with one- and two-year budgeting cycles found evidence both in favor and against it.²⁹ While states with biennial budgets were generally able to commit more time to program evaluation and reduce agency budgeting costs, forecasts were typically less reliable and lawmaker knowledge of budget matters sometimes decreased.³⁰

Similarly, after examining three states' experiences, a Government Accountability Report (GAO) submitted to the House Rules Committee offered the following conclusions:

Officials to whom we spoke described challenges to increasing oversight, including the following: (1) a short legislative session may not allow sufficient time for in-depth program review, (2) because the off-year budget process occurs in an election year, decisions to reduce funding or eliminate programs are potentially more difficult, and (3) budget surpluses for the past several years have reduced pressure to use an oversight process to identify budget savings.³¹

28. Ronald K. Snell, "State Experiences with Annual and Biennial Budgeting," National Conference of State Legislatures, April 2011. http://www.ncsl.org/documents/fiscal/biennialbudgeting_may2011.pdf.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Biennial Budgeting: Three States' Experiences," GAO-01-132, October 2000, pp. 4-7. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/230/229779.pdf>.

Department of Defense Case Study

At the federal level, the 1986 Department of Defense Authorization Act³² directed the agency to submit a two-year defense budget beginning with Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 to determine if this type of framework would prove to be more efficient and allow for better evaluation and programmatic planning within the department. Department of Defense (DoD) management argued that a biennial arrangement was necessary because the annual process made defense budgeting difficult, given that the budgets commonly proposed by Congress are designed to be campaign messaging tools and thus are unrealistic in practice. By switching the DoD to a biennial budget, management anticipated that the departmental effects of this strategy would lessen.

In an article summarizing its subsequent experiences, Professor Robert J. Art found that the two primary DoD budgeting deficiencies (poor planning and inadequate evaluation):

[...] can be more easily rectified if the Defense Department will budget biennially rather than annually because such a change, which at first seems marginal, in fact can have powerful effects by freeing up considerable time for the Pentagon's top-level management to plan and evaluate.³³

However, he also warned that “biennial budgeting is not a panacea and must not be viewed as such.”³⁴ While the switch showed some signs of improving defense budgeting and planning, it did very little to combat the difficulties associated with politicization or of true priority differences between the two parties on spending within the department.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

While budget experts differ on the anticipated advantages and difficulties of the federal government's adoption of a biennial budget framework, both proponents and critics have offered recommendations to lawmakers about how best to transition to a two-year process in order to maximize benefits and limit negative consequences. Several implementation suggestions have received strong support. These include:

Adopt only partial transition. Rather than to transition the entire federal budget to a two-year framework, a better strategy is to implement biennial budgets only for a limited number of appropriations bills. This type of experiment would better allow for the evaluation and remedy of any unintended consequences that might result from the switch. It would

32. P.L. 99-145

33. Robert J. Art, “The Pentagon: The Case for Biennial Budgeting,” *Political Science Quarterly* 104:2 (Summer 1989), p. 194.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

also provide Congress with tangible results that can better inform decision-making on future biennial budgeting decisions and potential transitions.³⁵

Implement biennial budgeting on programs and agencies with stable funding and spending levels. Because of their higher levels of funding and spending stability, certain federal agencies and programs better lend themselves to a two-year process. Accordingly, only these agencies and programs should be targeted for the transition.

Multi-year authorizations should precede consideration of biennial appropriations. Several budget experts, including former House Appropriations Committee Chairman C.W. “Bill” Young, have suggested that multi-year authorizations should be enacted prior to consideration of multi-year appropriations bills.³⁶ Doing so would likely provide more time for Congress to consider appropriations bills instead of having a more simultaneous structure.

Enact biennial budgets consistent with enforceable debt reduction targets. Linking multi-year budgets with debt-reduction and budget savings targets may promote fiscal stability and address the nation's debt problem. As determined by the Peterson-Pew Commission on Budget Reform, the debt-reduction targets must be statutorily enforceable and “remain in place unless subsequent laws are enacted to change either the path or the means of accomplishing [the debt target].”³⁷

CONCLUSION

Biennial budgeting has long been discussed as a potential reform to address widespread concerns that the federal budget process is too time consuming, redundant and ineffective. The topic has attracted both advocates and critics across the political spectrum whose opinions vary widely as to whether the implementation of a two-year budget cycle would help or hinder the problems associated with the current process.

Proponents argue that transitioning to a two-year cycle would allow better long-term planning and consideration of funding measures, more time for spending oversight and evaluation, and would reduce the amount of time members spend on repetitive budget matters. Critics, however, contend that biennial budgeting would produce less accurate fiscal forecasts, increased reliance on supplemental appropriations and provide no guarantee that any resulting time

35. Louis Fisher, “Biennial Budgeting in the Federal Government,” *Public Budgeting and Finance* 17:3 (Fall 1997), pp. 87-97.

36. Statement of Representative C.W. “Bill” Young, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress (GPO, March 2000), pp. 30-36.

37. “Eyes on the Horizon.” <http://budgetreform.org/document/eyes-horizon-multi-year-budgeting-and-its-role-federal-budget-process.html>.

savings would be spent on oversight. To date, no consensus has emerged.

While adopting a biennial budgeting framework would likely result in marginal improvements in fiscal planning and evaluation for agencies and programs, it is unlikely that major benefits would be realized due to the true differences in spending priorities between the two parties, as well as the potential for political gain associated with the current processes. Republicans and Democrats sincerely differ in budget priorities—both in the amounts and types of programs that warrant government funding. These differences are unlikely to be rectified simply by lengthening the amount of time members have to devote their consideration.

What’s more, increasing the amounts of funding decided by only considering them once per Congress will only serve to increase conflict over budget decisions. Government funding is inherently political, and thus is an inevitable source of conflict. Moreover, funding decisions have become a source of leverage for congressional leaders and members in the current political environment. Despite often-vocalized lawmaker frustration with the modern budget process, to maintain the status quo grants parties and members the opportunity to use the budget as a messaging tool for political purposes. It is unlikely that the parties—particularly the minority—will readily give up this source of leverage.

Further, granting more time for spending oversight and evaluation does not guarantee members would use it for those purposes. Given the levels of intra- and inter-party polarization within Congress, as well as the limitless number of legislative and representational duties each member is tasked with, it is unlikely that members would use the additional time this way. In fact, a framework that expects oversight and evaluation to be conducted during the second year of each Congress—the same year in which congressional elections occur—will merely incentivize the politicization of these activities. As articulated by former CBO director Dan L. Crippen: “The success of a biennial budget cycle would depend on whether lawmakers were able to separate budget and nonbudget issues in the way proponents envision. Various practical hurdles could make separating the two types of issues difficult.”³⁸ These hurdles, coupled with uncertainty as to whether Congress has the capacity and resources to effectively provide the increased fiscal oversight anticipated under a two-year framework make the benefits of its adoption debatable.

Until the several underlying issues—political and electoral—that have caused the devolution of the current congressio-

nal budget process are addressed, the adoption of a biennial budgeting framework will likely only provide marginal benefits, if any at all. Biennial budgeting will not solve the budget woes plaguing Congress. In actuality, its adoption could potentially make them worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Casey Burgat is a governance fellow at the R Street Institute. His research focuses on issues of congressional reform, with concentrations on legislative capacity and congressional staffing. Casey is also a doctoral student at the University of Maryland and formerly served within the Congressional Research Service’s Executive Branch Operations and Congress and Judiciary sections.

38. Testimony of Director, Congressional Budget Office, Dan L. Crippen, House Committee on Rules, “Biennial Budgeting: A Tool for Improving Government Fiscal Management and Oversight,” 106th Congress, March 10, 2000. <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/106th-congress-1999-2000/reports/031000.pdf>.