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The Partisan Politics of the Congressional Budget Process

Molly Reynolds
The Brookings Institution

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The Partisan Politics of the Congressional Budget Process

Molly Reynolds
Fellow, Governance Studies, The Brookings Institution

Brookings Mountain West Lecture
October 4, 2016
Flashback...to Last Week

- In order to avoid a partial government shutdown, Congress must adopt a short-term spending bill by October 1.
- Congress manages to complete this job on September 28, with just two days to spare. Lasts until December 9.
- Process is prolonged largely by disagreement between Republicans and Democrats about two issues:
  - Should funding for the Zika epidemic go to Puerto Rican affiliate of Planned Parenthood?
  - Should short-term spending bill include funds to address lead contamination issues in the water in Flint, MI?
“This is a serious situation, not a time for partisan politics.
   -Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL)*

“I think they are just being wholly partisan with these endless filibusters…The Senate has been blatantly political.”
   -Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI)**

“I’m tired of the partisan games being played.”
   -Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL)***

“Our colleagues across the aisle will point to partisan excuses, but the bottom line is this: There's no excuse not to pass these bills.”
   -Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY)****

*9/13/16; **9/7/16; ***9/7/16; ****9/6/16
THE FISCAL CLIFF FIGHT IS OVER!!!

DON'T...

DEBT CEILING FIGHT

JUMP.

CONGRESS
Obama, Congress Must Reach Deal On Budget By March 1, And Then April 1, And Then April 20, And Then April 28, And Then May 1

And Then Twice A Week For Next Four Years

The Onion, 2/27/13
How do party politics shape the budget process?
Outline

• (Short) overview of the budget process
• How is the budget process working?
• How does partisan politics affect the process?
• Will the 2016 election matter?
Source: National Priorities Project
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Budget Resolution

Federal agencies submit budgets for review

President submits budget request to Congress

House review & budget resolution

12 House Appropriations subcommittee markups & votes

House Appropriations Committee markup

House floor vote

Conference Committee

Senate review & budget resolution

12 Senate Appropriations subcommittee markups & votes

Senate Appropriations Committee markup

Senate floor vote

President vetoes or signs into law

Source: National Priorities Project
## Metric #1: Passing a Budget Resolution (FY1983-2017)

### Same Party Controlling Both Houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Resolutions</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democrats</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Success</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democrats</strong></td>
<td>92%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Different Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Resolutions</th>
<th>Democratic Senate</th>
<th>Republican Senate</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democratic Senate</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republican Senate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Success</th>
<th>Democratic Senate</th>
<th>Republican Senate</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democratic Senate</strong></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republican Senate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Metric #2: Developing Appropriations Bills

- **Number of Bills Reported by Appropriations Committees**

  - **House**: Represented by the light blue line.
  - **Senate**: Represented by the dark blue line.

  The graph shows the trend from 2007 to 2016, indicating fluctuations in the number of bills reported by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees over the years.
Metric #3: Passing Appropriations Bills
(FY1983-2017)
Metric #4: Continuing Resolutions (FY1998-2016)

Data: Congressional Research Service
Verdict: Congress regularly struggles to complete various parts of the budget process on time

Is party conflict to blame?

Yes.
Three Ways Party Conflict Can Affect the Budget Process

• Intra-party divisions

• Inter-party divisions

• Inter-branch divisions

• Woon and Anderson (2012) and Hanson (2014)
Divisions within the majority party
Intra-Party Conflict: Appropriations Committees

More appropriations delay when majority party appropriators are ideologically different from majority party as a whole (Woon and Anderson 2012)
Divisions between the parties
Inter-Party Conflict: Size of Senate Majority

More omnibus appropriations bills in Senate when Senate majority is smaller (Hanson 2014)
Inter-Party Conflict: Senate Polarization

More omnibus appropriations bills in Senate when Senate is more polarized (Hanson 2014)
Divisions between the branches
Congress vs. the President

More appropriations delay when Congress and the president are ideologically different (Woon and Anderson 2012)
Budget Process as a “Steam Valve”

• Intra- and inter-party divisions affect other parts of the legislative process too

• Party leaders respond by tightly managing legislative process, including restricting amendment opportunities

• Less able to do this in the budget process
Budget Process as a “Steam Valve”

“My reaction is it is like a steam kettle. You fire it up, and it is going to come out someplace. If Senators can freely offer amendments on other measures, they may not be as interested in offering amendments on the budget resolution. But as long as the budget resolution stands almost alone as a way for minority members to get votes on things that they are very interested in getting votes on, you will be a target.”

--former Senate Parliamentarian Bob Dove, 2009
Using the Steam Valve: 2015 Confederate Flag Debate

• July 2015: House is debating the EPA/Interior appropriations bill

• Democrats initially offer an amendment to the bill limiting the display of the Confederate flag on federal lands; the amendment is adopted

• Republicans respond with an amendment of their own that would undo the Democrats’ efforts

• Rather than hold a vote on the contentious issue, Republican leaders pull the bill from the floor.
Overall Amendments, House of Representatives

Source: Bipartisan Policy Center
Amendments to Appropriations Bills in the House

Average Number of Amendments Proposed per Bill


0 20 40 60 80 100 120
Amendments to the Senate Budget Resolution

- Amendments Offered to Budget Resolution
- Share of Filed Amendments Offered
Will the 2016 Election Matter?

- Some interest in both chambers in budget process reform, but little of that is directed at procedural components
- Possibility of a smaller House Republican majority
- Possibility of a very closely divided Senate
- Unified government wouldn’t be a panacea