

GOP Budget Revolt

Most Americans are cynical about politicians, and with cause. Congress wants to spend and spend until taxes have to go up, and the only voter recourse is to throw the bums out once in a while. If only somebody could devise a system with more institutional checks and balances.

Will Republicans step up to control spending?

Well, a few far-sighted lawmakers are trying to do precisely that. The rules governing Congress's annual budget process for the past 30 years have created a built-in bias toward waste and ever-larger government. To create the proper incentives for lower spending and taxes, four Congressmen have proposed the Family Budget Protection Act, due to be debated in the House as early as this week.

The federal government's out-of-control deficit spending since 1974 is actually an historic aberration. Congress took advantage of President Richard Nixon's post-Watergate weakness to pass the Congressional Budget Control and Impoundment Act. That law stripped the executive of the power to "impound" spending not authorized in the budget, and created a deliberately cumbersome system that maintains a facade of fiscal discipline but actually assists legislative log-rolling. The Founders' finely balanced separation of powers was upset.

Various band-aids have since been tried, with only temporary success. Gramm-Rudman briefly braked spending growth in the 1980s. Then so-called pay-as-you-go rules led to higher taxes rather than cuts in spending. A true spending-cut plan known as A to Z surfaced in 1994 but never got off the ground. Newt Gingrich's Contract With America gave Bill Clinton the line-item veto, only to have the Supreme Court rule it unconstitutional.

Who knows why it took so long, but finally somebody is going to the root of the problem. GOP Congressmen Chris Cox, Jeb Hensarling, Paul Ryan and Chris Chocola have catalogued the distortions introduced in 1974, and their bill would eliminate all of them.

At the top of the list, annual budget resolutions would be signed by the President and gain the force of law, rather than just being a "guideline." Moreover, the framework for appropriations would be much simpler than today's breakdown by committees and sub-committees. This would eliminate the back-room haggling over funding that encourages mutual pork-barreling, by bringing more of the budget process onto the floor of the two chambers and into the light of day.

Under the current system, committees routinely exceed their spending limits with a wink and a nod from arbiters of the rules. But under a statutory budget, any Member would be entitled to raise a point of order challenging budget-busting appropriations, and only a two-thirds major-

ity in both houses could overcome such an objection. Meanwhile, say good-bye to the Senate's Byrd Rule requirement that tax cuts lacking two-thirds support have only a 10-year lifespan; instead entitlements and discretionary items would sunset once every decade.

Also gone would be the perverse concept of baselining, under

which all proposals are scored against projected spending increases. This means that a plan to increase a budget item less than expected is portrayed as a spending "cut"—yet another institutional bias toward profligacy.

Some of the worst spending blowouts have occurred when Congress gets deadlocked and takes the budget down to the wire. The threat of a government shutdown forces those trying to limit spending to compromise, lest worthy programs have to close their doors. The Family Budget Protection Act would allow the government to keep operating at existing funding levels, but with across-the-board cuts of 1% for every quarter the budget is delayed. By taking away the leverage of the tax-and-spenders, the balance of power might shift back in favor of the taxpayers.

Perhaps most important, the bill would restore some of the power seized from the executive in 1974. Presidents would have the power of rescission on line items deemed wasteful, which would then be sent back to Congress for an expedited override vote. This preserves the constitutional principle of Congress controlling the power of the purse, but also creates some adult supervision and perhaps a deterrent effect on the porkers.

While the bill has more than 100 sponsors in the House, realistically there's little chance of passing the whole blueprint this year. So its champions have broken the reform into nine parts and will offer them as amendments to a bill already approved by Jim Nussle's Budget Committee. That way each idea will get more of an airing and with luck a few might even pass.

Sad to say, the reformers are running into opposition even from fellow Republicans, especially the Old Bulls on the Appropriations Committees. They're leaning on GOP leaders to rule out the amendment strategy so they don't have to declare their spending bias in public. The Bush White House has also been mute, unlike the Reagan Administration in the deficit-era of the 1980s.

Then Republicans had the excuse of House Democratic control, but now the runaway spending is on their watch. In their decades of dominance, Democrats changed Congressional processes to enhance their policy goals. Republicans have so far failed to do the same. Unless their talk about smaller government is so much eyewash, they should embrace this budget reform.

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Lost GOP Souls

Once upon a time, in a Congress far, far away, Republicans believed in smaller government. But you sure wouldn't know it from last Friday's budget-reform fiasco on the House floor.

By an astonishing vote of 326 to 88, the GOP-controlled body rejected the Family Budget Protection Act that would have removed the bias toward greater spending inherent in the current Congressional budget process. Even among Republicans, the bill lost 131 to 88. The Members also nixed the Spending Control Act, a less ambitious bill that Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle championed to impose spending caps, by a vote of 248 to 146.

Most of the credit for this repudiation of GOP principle belongs to the so-called "College of Cardinals," the chairmen of the 13 Appropriations subcommittees and protectors of sacred pork, who threatened their fellow Republicans with legislative excommunication if they voted for the reforms sponsored by some very brave GOP backbenchers. Specifically, they vowed to zero out all pork projects for their districts.

The cardinals—whose names are listed nearby—were on the floor twisting arms for virtually every vote. They have already retaliated by removing projects favored by the conservative Republican Study Committee from 2005 spending bills. That intimidation explains why even 20 GOP Members who had co-sponsored the budget reforms turned around and voted against them in the end.

It gets worse. The Members opposed giving the President rescission authority, which is the right to send individual spending items back to the Congress for an expedited vote. This relative of the line-item veto has been a staple of the Republican agenda going back

to the Reagan years and a version of it was part of the original Contract with America that helped the GOP carry the House in 1994. How quickly entrenched incumbents forget.

It may seem strange that the Republican Pooh-bahs pulled out all the stops to thwart measures that would never have passed the Senate anyway. The explanation is simple. This is the beginning of a fight for the soul of the Republican Party. The cardinals know that when the anti-spending battle is re-joined next year, anything that gained majority support this year would become the starting point for negotiations.

The sense of spending entitlement is so deep that some GOP leaders resorted to the Democratic rhetoric that giving the President rescission power represents an unacceptable surrendering of legislative power to the executive.

Considering the derision that conservatives once heaped on the old bulls of the Democrats for this line, Republicans are fortunate that nobody else in the press corps was paying attention to this debate.

To be fair, top GOP leaders did honor their promise to the reformers to let this debate take place and allow votes on the floor. This at least got the spenders on the record. But it's also true that Speaker Dennis Hastert, Majority Leader Tom DeLay and the rest did nothing to help pass even the most moderate spending-control measures.

Republicans should understand that, principle aside, sooner or later they are setting themselves up for a political fall. If Republicans won't campaign against spending to reduce the federal deficit, they will soon find themselves on the defensive on taxes. And if they ever vote for a tax increase, they can soon expect to find themselves back in the minority.

Gang of 13

House Appropriations subcommittee chairmen

Henry Bonilla, Texas	Charles Taylor, N.C.
Frank Wolf, Va.	Ralph Regula, Ohio
Jerry Lewis, Calif.	Jack Kingston, Ga.
Rodney Frelinghuysen, N.J.	Joe Knollenberg, Mich.
David Hobson, Ohio	Ernest Istook, Okla.
Jim Kolbe, Ariz.	James Walsh, N.Y.
Harold Rogers, Ky.	