



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

March 9, 2018

The Honorable Steve Womack
Co-Chairman
Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform
2412 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Co-Chairman
Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform
2365 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Womack and Lowey:

Congratulations on your appointment to the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform. We are especially appreciative that the legislation establishing your committee ensures that any recommendations for reform and consideration of subsequent legislation will require bipartisan support for enactment.

You have a challenging task ahead, but a successful outcome is essential to restore confidence in Congress's ability to budget efficiently. The time to reach consensus on bipartisan reform measures, however, is short and therefore limiting your scope of work to a select few of the major reform proposals will be necessary if you are to achieve that success.

Over the last many years, the Bipartisan Policy Center has actively supported the need to reform the congressional budget process. Our consensus-based approach requires that recommendations to address major public policy issues derive from expert policy makers, rigorous analysis, and full debate. That approach has been applied to the recommendations we have developed to reform the budget and appropriation process.

BPC offers and stands ready to assist the committee in this important work. Founded by four former Senate Majority Leaders, our organization is fortunate to be able to call upon former Senate and House members (now BPC Senior Fellows), and former congressional staff with long-established legislative, budgetary, and technical experience to provide resources to the committee as you require.

In that regard, three major BPC reports have been issued that we call to the attention of the committee:

1. [Proposals for Improving the Congressional Budget Process](#). This 2015 [report](#) was written by former OMB and CBO Director Dr. Alice Rivlin and the late Senator Pete V. Domenici, the longest serving Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee. The report contains 10 broad recommendations for reform of the budget process, but we want to highlight a few that we believe are doable within the short time frame you have for completing the committee's work.

First, Senator Domenici (both a Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee member) was a long-time supporter of moving a biennial budgeting cycle that would require Congress to adopt a budget and all appropriation bills in the first session of Congress, freeing up time in the second session for committees' authorization and oversight work. Failure to adopt a budget would result in the cancellation of all planned congressional recesses.

Second, the authors recommended that once a biennial budget is adopted that includes the level of debt subject to limit, Congress should be deemed to have enacted and sent to the president for approval or veto an extension of the statutory debt limit consistent with the assumptions in the adopted biennial budget. BPC staff are currently developing a refinement to this recommendation that would apply should a biennial budget not be adopted.

Third, the Rivlin-Domenici report recommended modifying the membership of the Senate and House Budget Committees to make them leadership committees that would include the chairs and ranking members of the major fiscal, tax, and economic committees, along with rotating membership from authorizing committees when major authorizations within their jurisdiction fall within the biennial budget cycle.

Finally, the Rivlin-Domenici report recommended that failure to adopt a biennial appropriation bill before the beginning of the first session of the biennial budget cycle would result in automatic funding of government programs and agencies at the previous year's level. The automatic continuing resolution would last for the full two biennial years (or until the enactment of full appropriations bills). There would be no threat of a government shutdown, with the inherent disruptive, costly effects on government services.

2. [Fixing Fiscal Myopia: Why and How We Should Emphasize the Long Term in Federal Budgeting](#). This 2016 [report](#) reflects the input of 22 respected budget and appropriation experts with years of experience in both the legislative and executive branches of government. A key point of consensus among this group was that a long-term fiscal goal is an essential first step toward putting the federal budget on a sustainable trajectory.

This could translate into having the U.S. set a goal to reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio from its current nearly 80 percent to 70 percent within 10 years or 60 percent within 25 years.

We respectfully suggest, however, that for completing your work in the limited time available, the committee should focus on procedures to improve the current decision-making process, not necessarily to achieve a particular budgetary goal in the future, however important that may be.

The following study focuses more broadly on legislative procedures than on budgetary outcomes.

3. Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy.

Finally, BPC launched the Commission on Political Reform in 2013 to address specific reforms to improve the political process working within a polarized atmosphere. The 29 highly respected Americans that made up the commission were chaired by the former Senate Majority Leaders Trent Lott and Tom Daschle, former Senator Olympia Snowe, former Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman and former Governor Dirk Kempthorne. The commission issued its [report](#) in 2014.

While the commission advanced recommendations dealing with the electoral process, the broad management of Congress, and public service, it did also make two specific recommendations relevant to the budget and appropriation process. These were: (1) that Congress should adopt a biennial budget process with expedited consideration given to enacting into law two-year discretionary spending ceilings for enforcement purposes, and (2) to further enhance the role and importance of the authorizing committees, leadership should strictly enforce existing House and Senate rules prohibiting legislative language included in appropriation bills.

Participants in the development of these reports would be honored to discuss any of their recommendations with the committee as you begin your deliberations. The list of options that have been developed over the recent past to reform the budget and appropriation process is long, interactive, complex and often politically charged. A first step in achieving committee success, we humbly suggest, would be to narrow the long list of reform options to a limited number that that can be achievable in the short time period you have and thereby establish the foundation for further bipartisan advancements in the forthcoming Congress.

Sincerely,



Jason Grumet
President

cc: The Honorable Jodey Arrington
The Honorable Derek Kilmer
The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
The Honorable Pete Sessions
The Honorable Rob Woodall

The Honorable John Yarmuth

The Honorable Michael Bennet

The Honorable Roy Blunt

The Honorable Joni Ernst

The Honorable Mazie Hirono

The Honorable James Lankford

The Honorable David Perdue

The Honorable Brian Schatz

The Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse