

Congress can rehabilitate the federal government with a comprehensive budget

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August 2024

Congress doesn't make policy holistically. But it should. Today's piecemeal process limits the ability of the people's representatives to improve the structure and finance of the government's activities.

Without effective congressional budgeting practices in place, the government's growing size and scope in the early Twentieth Century eventually overwhelmed members of Congress. The informal practices that worked well enough when activities were mostly limited to enumerated powers eventually took on broad deference to the head of the executive branch: the president.

Congress has periodically reasserted itself. The Anti-Deficiency Act has checked White House spending beyond congressional appropriations. The Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 has required presidents to make budget requests to Congress so members can see the full picture. The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 established the Congressional Budget Office, the budget committees, and an attempt at a coordinated congressional budget process.¹

Yet Congress must do more to reclaim its rightful role in the republic. The entropy of duplicative, poorly coordinated, and outdated programs keeps growing.² Wasteful spending, tax loopholes, deficits, and debt abound. Most members of Congress feel little ability to make a difference.

These systemic problems require systemic solutions. Better policymakers can help at the margin, but the incentives buffeting Congress encourage disorder and undermine coherence and responsibility. It is easy to give generously of other people's money and difficult to scale back.

A congressional budget should be the federal government's gravitational center. It is not. There is no center. The vacuum is filled poorly by presidents, party leaders, inertia, bloat, and decay.

Paradoxically, Congress gets low returns for the substantial time it spends on budget-related activities. Debt limit showdowns, shutdown brinkmanship, appropriations bills, and several continuing resolutions per year bring surprisingly little change. Effective budgeting could dramatically improve outcomes while taking less time – a much higher return on investment.

¹ Antideficiency Act, Title 31, United States Code, §1341 et seq. Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, Pub. L. 67-13, 42 Stat. 20. Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974, Pub. L. 93-344, 88 Stat. 297.

² Government Accountability Office, "2024 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Billions of Dollars in Financial Benefits," GAO-24-106915, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106915>, May 15, 2014. Congressional Budget Office, "Expired and Expiring Authorizations of Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2023," <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58954>, April 27, 2023.

What's wrong with federal budgeting?

Congress doesn't do a budget. It never has.

Appropriations aren't a budget. They fund many important activities – along with some nonsense – but they're only 26 percent of spending and no revenue.

Table 1: Appropriations are a fraction of the federal budget (\$B, FY2025)

Expenditures (outlays)		Receipts	
Appropriations	\$1,813	Revenue*	\$5,038
Direct Spending	\$4,217	Borrowing	\$1,938
Net Interest	\$1,016		
Total	\$6,975	*Tax Expenditures	(\$1,979)

Source: CBO, JCT³

A concurrent resolution on the budget isn't a budget. It's an agreement between the House and the Senate on a budget framework for subsequent legislation. Its power comes from structuring and guiding subsequent fiscal policymaking, or at least, it could, if what followed harnessed Congress' capabilities appropriately.

Budget reconciliation isn't a budget. It's supposed to adjust spending and revenue to match the vision in the budget resolution. Once a tool of deficit reduction, it has become a loophole for one-party government to pursue its policy goals while increasing the borrowing.

The president's budget *request* includes a budget proposal and much more. It's also a briefing book, historical and prospective tables, conceptual reports, and related information. It would be far more useful – and grounded – if Congress did a budget bill each year.

Unfortunately, Congress does no such thing.

That's a barrier to members of Congress managing many federal programs. Never having to make decisions about most government activities lets members avoid learning about existing policies. It's a big reason why the federal government lacks a coherent economic program, why tyranny of the majority party has become normal, and why the American people feel like Congress is unaccountable.

Congress rarely adopts a budget resolution except to unlock reconciliation during ephemeral periods of one-party government. Often, outcomes fall short of expectations, as in Republicans'

³ Congressional Budget Office, "10-Year Budget Projections," <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2024-06/51118-2024-06-Budget-Projections.xlsx>, June 2024. Joint Committee on Taxation, "Estimates Of Federal Tax Expenditures For Fiscal Years 2023-2027," JCX-59-23, <https://www.jct.gov/publications/2023/jcx-59-23/>, December 7, 2023. JCT's measure of tax expenditures is against a modified Haig-Simons "comprehensive income" baseline, which includes provisions that would not be so designated under a consumption baseline.

failed health overhaul in 2017 and Democrats' Build Back Better Act downsizing to the Inflation Reduction Act in 2021. Enacted reconciliation bills inflame polarization while adding to the debt.

Appropriations bills still proceed, but few members are satisfied with the process or the outcomes. The appropriations process finishes an average of five months late⁴ through a top-down, back-room process that excludes nearly all members. The leaders and senior appropriators that strike the deals face blowback, most obviously reflected in the challenges to House Republican leaders. Shutdown politics leads to budget bloat, partisan acrimony, and power concentrations that are improper for republican legislatures of purported equals.

Most committees lack regular opportunities to manage their program portfolios, let alone in the context of the rest of the budget. The budget committees are so weak that their own senior members have openly wondered if they are worth having.

The president's budget proposal is usually late and contains fantastic visions far from political viability. Most members of Congress ignore most of the request, even calling it "dead on arrival."⁵

Meanwhile, annual deficits and accumulated debt are growing unsustainably. A sudden surge of new debt triggered unusually high inflation in recent years.⁶ Debt drag already undermines prosperity, ratings agencies are downgrading federal credit, and the government is lumbering toward a debilitating debt crisis.⁷

Trust funds for highway programs, Social Security, and Medicare are on track to deplete their reserves within fifteen years.⁸

Program duplication, discoordination, overlap, and fragmentation are rampant. Policies are outdated, and making updates requires disproportionate effort. Bureaucrats are out of control. Federalism is in tatters. Too many members think bipartisanship is merely "nice to have," not "need to have."

⁴ James V. Saturno, Megan S. Lynch, Bill Heniff Jr., Drew C. Aherne, and Justin Murray, "Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report R46595, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46595>, updated May 16, 2023.

⁵ Molly E. Reynolds, "The president's budget and the battle ahead," Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-presidents-budget-and-the-battle-ahead/>, March 10, 2023.

⁶ Kurt Couchman and Ilana Blumsack, "Bidenflation Blame Game: How Big-Spending Politicians Scapegoat Business," Americans for Prosperity, <https://americansforprosperity.org/featured/afp-report-shows-that-bidenomics-not-business-creates-inflation/>, June 27, 2024.

⁷ Romina Boccia, "Fast Facts about the U.S. Federal Debt," Cato at Liberty, <https://www.cato.org/blog/fast-facts-about-us-federal-debt>, March 23, 2023. Fitch Ratings, "Fitch Downgrades the United States' Long-Term Ratings to 'AA+' from 'AAA'; Outlook Stable," <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/fitch-downgrades-united-states-long-term-ratings-to-aa-from-aaa-outlook-stable-01-08-2023>, August 1, 2023. Davide Barbuscia and Andrea Shalal, "Moody's turns negative on US credit rating, draws Washington ire," Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/us/moodys-changes-outlook-united-states-ratings-negative-2023-11-10/>, November 10, 2023.

⁸ CBO, "An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2024 to 2034," <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2024-06/60039-Outlook-2024.pdf>, June 18, 2024.

A comprehensive congressional budget to the rescue

This mess is an outgrowth of systemic dysfunction. Congress can do far more to harness the collective experiences, insights, and energies of members to fix problems.

Congress developing a real budget bill each year could deflate many of today's governance problems. A comprehensive congressional budget bill would give all members and committees regular legislative opportunities, foster a bottom-up process, let members build bipartisan coalitions for their priorities, and empower Congress to chip away consistently at big problems instead of trying to eat the elephant all at once.

A complete budget would dramatically improve the culture of Congress. Being able to build temporary coalitions on a wide range of topics would make good relationships far more valuable and impose real costs on bad faith actions and obnoxious behaviors. Members of the minority party would try to build support for their priorities with members of the majority. Reciprocating, members of the majority party would be more able to build bridges across the aisle for their proposals, which is especially valuable during divided government. Members would still have diverse views, of course, but they'd be more likely to disagree courteously.

A comprehensive budget process would include all revenue and spending, engage all committees to manage their programs, and establish smart guardrails and backstops. It would give members of Congress the political cover from popular appropriated programs to make tough-but-necessary adjustments throughout the budget. The regular chance to reshape programs would help Congress check errant and overreaching executive branch officials.

A comprehensive budget would recognize that a budget is inherently one document that includes everything. All spending. All revenue. All together.

Each committee of jurisdiction would lead the annual checkup for its areas of responsibility. Members would usually tend to give committee-led initiatives deference, especially if committees were microcosms of the parties, but ultimately the full body would have the final word on the floor. Committees would propose, and everyone could review and adjust everything all together.

Holistic management is how any successful private sector enterprise operates. Managers must ensure that revenues cover costs, at least in the medium and long run. Looking across all operations lets them find efficiencies and new opportunities. Congress even mandates that publicly traded companies disclose information about assets, income, and liabilities through the Securities and Exchange Commission, although internal business decisions are far more granular.

Many state legislatures consider only one or a few bills per budget cycle, which may be annual or biennial. Fourteen states do a single bill: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Another sixteen do two to five bills: Illinois, New Hampshire, New Mexico, California, Kansas, Washington, Texas, Alaska, Delaware, Ohio, Vermont, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Nevada, and New York. Typically, one bill covers the operating budget or most of it, and the others may include capital expenditures, programs within special funds, or conforming provisions to permanent and general laws (the code).⁹

State budgeting inspired the idea of a comprehensive budget for Congress,¹⁰ but every state could do better. Legislators considering one bill with all spending, revenue, and tax preferences would empower legislators to drive greater value for their residents. We discuss this best practice with state legislators regularly, and Georgia took a significant step toward it this year.¹¹

Several high-performing governments abroad rely on a comprehensive budget. Germany's parliament, for instance, takes up and revises a roughly 2,500-page budget act¹² to carry out the constitution's requirement that "[a]ll revenues and expenditures of the Federation shall be included in the budget."¹³ Even so, limiting provisions to "the period for which [the budget] is enacted" may limit the budget's ability to address long-term, structural challenges.

Similarly, Estonia's 2008 budget bill included "925 line items, including 810 for expenditures, 90 for revenues and 25 for financing transactions."¹⁴ The Estonian Constitution requires that the parliament "passes a law which contains a budget that sets out all items of government revenue and expenditure."¹⁵

Finally, Congress insists on more complete information from others. The president's proposal must include "appropriations, expenditures, and receipts of the Government," "essential information about the debt of the Government," and "the level of tax expenditures in existing law," among other requirements.¹⁶ Similarly broad scope informs annual reports from the Department of the Treasury, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Government Accountability Office.¹⁷

⁹ National Association of State Budget Officers, *Budget Processes in the States: 2021*, Table 22: Enacted Budget, p. 137, <https://www.nasbo.org/reports-data/budget-processes-in-the-states>, Spring 2021.

¹⁰ Kurt Couchman, "States show how Congress can fix a broken budget process," *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/economy-budget/560057-states-show-how-congress-can-fix-a-broken-budget-process/>, June 24, 2021.

¹¹ Sen. Chuck Hufstetler, SB 366, "Tax Expenditures Transparency Act of 2024," <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/66136>, enacted April 22, 2024.

¹² Deutscher Bundestag, "Adoption of the federal budget," <https://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/adoption-245712>, accessed July 25, 2024.

¹³ Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (English translation), Article 110.

¹⁴ Kraan, D., J. Wehner and K. Richter (2008), "Budgeting in Estonia", OECD Journal on Budgeting, vol. 8/2, <https://doi.org/10.1787/budget-v8-art8-en>.

¹⁵ The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (English translation), Section 115.

¹⁶ Title 31, United States Code, §1105, subsections (a)(7), (10), and (16).

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Financial Report of the United States Government," <https://www.fiscal.treasury.gov/reports-statements/financial-report/current-report.html>, accessed August 2, 2024. U.S.

Congress should adopt this best practice: one bill with all spending and revenue, all together, with all committees managing their portfolios.

Enter the bipartisan Comprehensive Congressional Budget Act of 2024

Getting Congress from here to there is a technical, political, and procedural challenge. Fortunately, new legislation largely solves the policy puzzle in a realistic way. Following an outline in a white paper,¹⁸ we engaged congressional partners to turn the concepts into legislation. In January 2024, Reps. Blake Moore (R-UT) and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (D-WA) introduced H.R. 6953, the Comprehensive Congressional Budget Act of 2024 (CCBA).¹⁹

The CCBA would put the “comprehensive” in the Congressional Budget Act (CBA) of 1974. By closing the rift between appropriations and the rest of the budget, Congress could make coherent fiscal policy far more easily. This context-rich, accountable venue for committees to manage their portfolios would replace budget reconciliation.

Key to CCBA’s viability, it would retain much of the familiar process. The president’s budget request to Congress would still be due by the first Monday in February. The Congressional Budget Office’s “Budget and Economic Outlook” would set out a new budget baseline each January or February. In February and March, committees would send “views and estimates” of their budget priorities to the budget committees. The budget committees would produce – and both houses would approve – a budget resolution with topline spending allocations for each committee by April 15. The appropriations committees would subdivide their allocation into suballocations for the twelve subcommittee bills and write those bills accordingly. Committee jurisdictions would remain intact.

The Comprehensive Congressional Budget Act would build on these foundations. It would simplify and rationalize budgeting while expanding the number of participants and the scope of bargaining options. Members of Congress are frustrated by a process that largely excludes them. They want to matter, not merely to rubber-stamp others’ priorities. If our numerous conversations with members

Congressional Budget Office, “An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2024 to 2034,” <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60039>, June 18, 2024. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “The Nation’s Fiscal Health: Road Map Needed to Address Projected Unsustainable Debt Levels,” GAO-24-106987, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106987>, February 15, 2024.

¹⁸ Kurt Couchman, “Unified Budgets Can Help Revive Congress,” Americans for Prosperity, <https://indd.adobe.com/view/ffa5b36d-118b-424d-a4a4-d16f1b849ec8>, December 2021.

¹⁹ Rep. Blake Moore, “U.S. Representatives Moore and Gluesenkamp Perez Introduce Legislation to Reform the Congressional Budget Process,” <https://blakemoore.house.gov/media/press-releases/us-representatives-moore-and-gluesenkamp-perez-introduce-legislation-reform>, January 11, 2024. Rep. Blake Moore, the Comprehensive Congressional Budget Act, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/6953>, introduced January 11, 2024. Americans for Prosperity, “AFP Praises Comprehensive Budget Bill, Calls on Congress to Create a Real Budget,” <https://americansforprosperity.org/press-release/afp-praises-comprehensive-budget-bill-calls-on-congress-to-create-a-real-budget/>, January 11, 2024.

and staff about comprehensive budgeting are any indication, members are hungry for fair consideration of their ideas.

Though the impacts would be substantial, the procedural changes would be modest.

First, committee views and estimates would include baseline levels for each direct (“mandatory”) spending program for the budget year. The budget committees would divvy up these line items from already-existing, CBO-provided materials. Including the line items in a committee’s views and estimates would acknowledge the starting points from which it could move.

Second, the budget resolution would no longer include reconciliation instructions, as the CCBA would eliminate budget reconciliation. This complicated, polarizing, deficit-increasing-in-fact process that expects U.S. senators to defer to the quasi-judicial pronouncements of the parliamentarian – a staffer – would be gone.

Instead, the report accompanying the budget resolution would give each committee with spending authority a top-line spending cap. These per-committee caps are “302(a) allocations,” a reference to subsection (a) of section 302 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974. Currently lacking purpose, the 302(a) allocations in a comprehensive budget would kick off each committee’s chance to manage its programs. Spending allocations would mean something.

Non-appropriations committees receiving allocations would be the House Committees on Agriculture; Armed Services; Education and the Workforce; Energy and Commerce; Financial Services; Foreign Affairs; Homeland Security; House Administration; Judiciary; Natural Resources; Oversight and Accountability; Science, Space, and Technology; Small Business; Transportation and Infrastructure; Veterans’ Affairs; and Ways and Means; and the Senate Committees on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; Armed Services; Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs; Commerce, Science, and Transportation; Energy and Natural Resources; Environment and Public Works; Finance; Foreign Relations; Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; Indian Affairs; Intelligence; Judiciary; Rules and Administration; Small Business and Entrepreneurship; and Veterans’ Affairs.

Third, Social Security and payments to the postal service would come “on-budget.” Members of the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means Committees would have an annual venue for mini-deals to postpone trust fund depletion and otherwise improve the programs through whatever combination of spending and revenue adjustments they could agree. Under current law, Social Security’s Old Age and Survivors Insurance trust fund would run dry around 2033 and impose a 21 percent cut on all beneficiaries.²⁰

²⁰ The Board of Trustees, Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds, “The 2024 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds,” <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/TR/2024/tr2024.pdf>, May 7, 2024.

Putting Social Security on budget would help members chip away at its funding gap and extend trust fund balances with politically tolerable changes each year. Merely delaying depletion by a year or two regularly would reduce or perhaps entirely avoid cuts from trust fund exhaustion.²¹

Fourth, if the House and Senate do not adopt a concurrent resolution on the budget by April 15, the budget chairs would deem committee allocations to reflect the budget baseline amounts previously included in committee views and estimates. A budget resolution impasse would not short-circuit the entire process. This current-policy anchor also would guide budget resolutions toward viability and away from messaging make-believe. This is the first critical fallback.

Fifth, each authorizing committee would review and could alter direct spending and revenue provisions in its jurisdiction. The appropriations committees would still manage annually appropriated (“discretionary”) spending with 302(b) suballocations to their twelve subcommittees. Authorizing committees could adjust their programs within their overall spending allocation. Unless affirmatively changed, direct spending and revenue policies would continue automatically.

The Senate Finance and House Ways and Means committees would presumably submit separate spending and revenue components. The latter would ideally include tax rates and bases as well as the Joint Committee on Taxation’s tax expenditures.²² The CCBA would not require that explicitly, but budget resolutions could while also setting revenue floors. Congress could move regularly toward simpler, more transparent, more pro-growth tax policies.

These constrained opportunities would substantially increase congressional interest in more accurate cost estimates from CBO and JCT. More data points would soon expose systematic biases, and more members would have a stake in pursuing the statutory and operational changes needed to improve CBO and JCT’s assumptions and practices.

Sixth, authorizing committees would transmit to the appropriations committee their line items, adjusted for policy changes, along with language to carry out those adjustments. The budget committees would oversee the submissions for compliance with the budget resolution or deemed allocations, as the case may be.

If a committee doesn’t make a compliant submission to the appropriations committee by May 15, the Appropriations Committee would insert that committee’s current-law line items, which would have been in that committee’s views and estimates. This second fallback would keep problems in one part from derailing the whole. Even then, members of such a committee could propose a

²¹ Kurt Couchman, “Is Social Security in Trouble? Yes, and We Need Automatic Fiscal Stabilizers to Help,” Americans for Prosperity, <https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/why-social-security-is-in-trouble/>, July 20, 2022.

²² Joint Committee on Taxation, “Estimates Of Federal Tax Expenditures For Fiscal Years 2023-2027,” JCX-59-23, <https://www.jct.gov/publications/2023/jcx-59-23/>, December 7, 2023.

substitute amendment for its division on the floor, but it would then be subject to majority affirmation instead of being in the base bill.

Of course, each committee's members would face pressure from each other and from members not on that committee, especially from leaders, to do their job. Committee members wouldn't want to miss their chance to make a mark. Members of different committees would expect each other to be responsible and carry their weight, especially if the budget resolution assumes greater efficiencies than current policy.

Seventh and finally, the appropriations committees would bundle their twelve subcommittee bills with the direct spending and revenue submissions from the other committees

The differing jurisdictions for authorizing committees between the House and the Senate would require accommodation of some sort. The Constitution explicitly vests the origination of revenue measures in the House, which implicitly and by custom indicates that appropriations legislation should begin there as well. It may therefore be proper for the Senate to accommodate House jurisdictions. That is, however, not stated in the CCBA and would need to be worked out.

Appropriators couldn't make substantive changes to other committees' submissions. They would simply bundle their subcommittee bills with those from other committees. Appropriators would be wise to put the twelve appropriations bills first so that any floor amendment touching an appropriations provision would come up during appropriator-managed floor time.

Normal procedures would apply to floor consideration. The CCBA is silent. Even so, rethinking the amendment process could be especially useful for legislation with such broad scope.²³ Likewise, standard practices for resolving differences between the House and the Senate and addressing presidential vetoes would apply to the annual budget act.

A comprehensive budget would differ from an omnibus appropriations act in several important ways. First, it would include all spending and revenue, not just appropriations' 26 percent of spending. Second, committees would develop each piece of a comprehensive budget separately and in open markup within the budget resolution's bounds. Finally, it would earn members' votes by involving them in the process rather than by forcing them to swallow an exclusive, bloated, backroom-drafted omnibus bill against the threat of a government shutdown.

²³ Kurt Couchman, "Bottom-up filters for floor amendments in the House of Representatives," <https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/bottom-up-filters-amendments-house-representatives/>, Americans for Prosperity, May 10, 2024.

A comprehensive budget would grow the pie of policymaking by Congress

Putting all spending and revenue policies into an annual budget act would help Congress allocate resources more productively. Explicit tradeoffs between programs would reveal how to improve value for taxpayers and the public at large.

Doing so would create numerous opportunities for members of Congress.

Appropriators, for instance, wouldn't be on their own anymore. Members of other committees would also have skin in the game and would want to see their priorities enacted. That would help the budget-embedded appropriations advance with more members having more reasons to vote for the overall package.

A real budget would redirect members' attention to the parts of the budget that are growing faster than appropriations or have low merit. Finally, Congress could shift resources into appropriations if that's where they see the most value. Appropriations need not be so tightly limited by arbitrary caps.

The "changes in mandatory programs" or "CHIMPs" that appropriators often use to claim offsets WITHIN appropriations would be unavailable for that purpose. Authorizing committees would manage those programs directly, but it would be no great loss to appropriators. Appropriators would face less pressure to find savings in general, CHIMPs and other perceived-as-shady practices wouldn't cloud other members' views of appropriations activities, and the budget chairs could bump up the appropriations 302(a) allocation to reflect savings elsewhere.

Authorizers would benefit too. They would have a clear, predictable, regular opportunity to manage their programs in a bill that many members have reasons to support. Today, they do not. Authorizers would do this within the constraints of per-committee spending caps, which is far more than they get now, and other committees would have similar bounded empowerment to pursue their priorities.

A comprehensive budget would help authorizers oversee fee-funded agencies too jurisdictions. The tax committees manage receipts – collections "from Government exercise of its sovereign power" – but other committees have jurisdiction over various "offsetting collections" and "offsetting receipts," which are fees from business-like activities. These include immigration, energy, financial services, insurance, and many other fees. At about 2.5 percent of GDP, they are treated as negative outlays and would therefore be well within committees' budgeting scope.²⁴

²⁴ Office of Management and Budget, "19. Offsetting Collections and Offsetting Receipts," *Analytical Perspectives, President's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2025*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ap_19_offsetting_fy2025.pdf, March 11, 2024.

For a committee to spend more, members would have to get higher initial allocations in the budget resolution or a reserve fund to allow adjustments later. Either way, the push and pull of committees with different priorities would gradually reshape fiscal priorities toward the overall sense of Congress of what the country needs from the federal government. Perfection may be impossible, but a tolerable, mutual accommodation of diverse principles and interests within reasonable limits would improve considerably on today's results.

The budget committees would manage and oversee this entire process. They would produce a budget resolution each year in coordination with leaders and other committees. Views and estimates would matter. Budget committees would coordinate with the Congressional Budget Office to ensure that committee submissions are within their allocations. They could return non-compliant submissions to the originating committee to be fixed. They would design and enforce additional guardrails.

A comprehensive budget would expand legislative opportunities for all within a self-reinforcing framework of modest fiscal scarcity. It wouldn't require that Congress meet any particular target, like a balanced budget rule or debt-to-GDP targets.

It would, however, set enforceable topline in the budget resolution. Putting everything together would make members more accountable for the overall situation, and the American people dislike high deficits and debt. Members would want to show progress on reducing deficits and controlling the debt burden. Today's dysfunction lets members blame others' priorities for bad budget outcomes. That's tough to sustain for a package deal.

Though the CCBA does not require it, a comprehensive congressional budget bill could include a debt limit increase. Congress weighing spending and revenue options against the debt limit would address a central problem GAO has identified with current practices, namely that the federal debt limit "does not restrict Congress's ability to pass spending and revenue legislation that affects the level of debt."²⁵ Extraordinary measures²⁶ would start to run around the time the next year's budget would be due, which would help the next cycle wrap up on time. This would also discourage deficit-increasing legislation between budgets.

In the aggregate, a comprehensive budget would promote a more transparent, committee-led, bottom-up legislative process. Leaders could focus on the managerial functions that only they can do while reducing unrealistic expectations that they can deliver what everyone wants.

²⁵ Government Accountability Office, "The Nation's Fiscal Health: Effective Use of Fiscal Rules and Targets," GAO-20-561, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-561.pdf>, September 2020.

²⁶ Grant A. Driessen and Brendan McDermott, "Debt Limit Policy Questions: How Long Do Extraordinary Measures Last," Congressional Research Service, CRS Insight IN12147, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12147>, updated January 2024.

Mistakes would be less likely and easier to reverse. An annual budget bill would help members vote against half-baked proposals. Bad ideas would get nipped in the bud before they gain momentum. Bad approaches to good ideas could fail this year, get workshopped, and try again next year.

Greater congressional capacity to make budget policy would strengthen the legislature. This transparent approach to managing everything would make better use of distributed knowledge among legislators and create space for bipartisan problem-solving. It would help Congress clean up the budget, reduce entropy, consolidate and simplify programs, and ensure adequate resources for the highest priorities.

A comprehensive budget could benefit presidents as well. Like congressional budget resolutions, presidents' budget requests have drifted from sober management documents toward vision-based messaging. Congressional budgeting that maps more closely onto the president's request could pull the latter toward the art of the possible. Better congressional budgeting would also help control the debt burden and expand the fiscal space for emerging priorities, whether proposed by presidents or by members of Congress.

Naturally, a comprehensive budget would focus primarily on fiscal policy. Non-fiscal authorization legislation would usually move separately. Yet a real budget would dramatically deepen member and staff knowledge of spending and revenue policies and how they fit together. Indeed, the budget process could inspire authorizations to improve program coordination, reduce overlap and duplication, prevent fraud, and otherwise fine-tune selected activities.

Multi-committee working groups could find better ways to deliver health care, housing, nutrition assistance, national security, revenue generation, and a host of other related policies. They could address fiscal aspects in the budget act and complementary pieces through separate authorization bills. That said, the budget would provide flexibility because the CCBA says that provisions "should" have fiscal effects but without mandating it ("shall").

The CCBA would not preclude supplemental appropriations or other fiscal legislation from advancing outside of the annual budget bill. Members would, however, have a more holistic sense of programs and existing policies' suitability for emergent situations. Keeping emergency spending from becoming a budget loophole requires complementary-but-separate well-crafted budget targets where emergencies are offset, but not right away.²⁷

²⁷ Kurt Couchman, "We should offset emergencies — just not right away," *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/425384-we-should-offset-emergencies-just-not-right-away/>, January 15, 2019

Conclusion: A comprehensive budget is the flagship of the budget-fix flotilla

A comprehensive congressional budget would help Congress become a much more active and productive manager of the federal government's spending and tax policies. It would engage many more committees and members in improving the government's return on investment for American taxpayers.

In so doing, Congress would discover how to preserve the federal government's most valuable contributions while finding opportunities to improve efficiencies. It would do so within a framework that promotes fiscal responsibility while providing flexibility to adapt as society changes. It would substantially upgrade Congress' means and motivation to legislate better.

A comprehensive congressional budget is not, however, a silver bullet to slay all federal budget monsters. Among the options for systemic upgrades, it would do the most to repair incentives facing members of Congress. It would also amplify the benefits of complementary changes.

For example, Congress usually gets the president's budget request late, and the national security strategy comes but once per presidential term instead of every year with the budget request, as statute requires.²⁸ Congress could withhold the invitation for the president to give the State of the Union address until it gets those reports, as Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) and Representative Buddy Carter (R-GA) proposed in the Send Us Budget Materials and International Tactics In Time (SUBMIT IT) Act.²⁹

Yet the president's budget is late partly because the prior year's budgeting doesn't conclude on time. A late conclusion, shutdown drama, and bloated backroom-negotiated omnibus spending deals are the unfortunate results of the Carter Administration's creation of shutdowns in 1980.³⁰

Senators James Lankford (R-OK) and Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Representatives Jodey Arrington (R-TX) and Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), and cosponsors have proposed reversing that Carter decision with the Prevent Government Shutdowns Act. The 45-year experiment with the possibility of government shutdowns would be over. The bill would keep spending and programs going after a funding period had ended, and Congress would be stuck in DC and generally unable to move onto other legislation until budgeting is done. This, too, would support a more bottom-up process

²⁸ Title 50, United States Code, § 3043.

²⁹ Sen. Joni Ernst, "Ernst Requires Actions, Not Just Words, from President," Press Release, <https://www.ernst.senate.gov/news/press-releases/ernst-requires-actions-not-just-words-from-president>, February 5, 2024. Kurt Couchman, "What is the SUBMIT IT Act?" Americans for Prosperity, <https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/what-is-the-submit-it-act/>, March 4, 2024.

³⁰ Tom Shoop, "That Time a Lawyer Invented the Government Shutdown," *Government Executive*, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2022/10/time-lawyer-invented-government-shutdown/378935/>, October 27, 2022.

because shutdowns couldn't be leveraged to force members to vote for an omnibus appropriations act they didn't have a chance to review.³¹

Finally, reasonable budget targets would give direction to a comprehensive budget, which would boost the options for meeting goals. Inspired by the Swiss “debt brake,” the United States could pair a broad constitutional requirement for balance like Senator Mike Braun (R-IN) and Representative Nathaniel Moran’s (R-TX) Principles-based Balanced Budget Amendment with statutory budget targets like Senator Braun and Representative Tom Emmer’s (R-MN) Responsible Budget Targets Act.³² Rep. Arrington’s Business Cycle Balanced Budget Amendment is another good option.³³ These could be strengthened further with a better approach to automatic budget enforcement³⁴ and suspending the debt limit when Congress hits the targets.³⁵

The federal government has gone off track. Steering it back toward competence and responsibility requires a centralizing force of some kind. Presidents, congressional leaders, and foreign challenges no longer exert that gravitational force, if they ever did.

A comprehensive congressional budget would coordinate the consideration of tradeoffs needed to reverse dysfunction and reinvigorate the bottom-up problem solving at the heart of a well-functioning legislature. Providing more outlets for the vast talents of members and staff could bring extraordinary policy results while improving the culture of Congress.

A comprehensive congressional budget and related upgrades would help Congress accomplish the intent of the 1974 Budget Act: sound budgeting by the people’s representatives. With better tools, Congress can reclaim its policy leadership and do it better than ever.

³¹ Sen. James Lankford, “Lankford, Hassan, Colleagues Want to Stop Government Shutdowns, Force Congress to Do its Job,” <https://www.lankford.senate.gov/news/press-releases/lankford-hassan-colleagues-want-to-stop-government-shutdowns-force-congress-to-do-its-job/>, Press Release, January 30, 2023.

³² Jenny Gesley, “Switzerland, implementation of Article 126 of the Swiss Constitution: the ‘debt brake,’” Law Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016591729/>, June 2016. Kurt Couchman, “What is the Responsible Budget Targets Act?” Americans for Prosperity, <https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/responsible-budget-targets-act/>, June 21, 2023. Kurt Couchman, “Revisiting the Balanced Budget Amendment: Toward Designs Without Defects,” Americans for Prosperity, https://americansforprosperity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/BBApaper_print.pdf, November 2023. Sen. Mike Braun, S.J.Res.19, “A joint resolution proposing a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution of the United States,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/19>, March 15, 2023. Rep. Nathaniel Moran, H.J.Res.80, “A joint resolution proposing a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution of the United States,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-joint-resolution/80>, July 13, 2023.

³³ Rep. Jodey Arrington, “Arrington Introduces Balanced Budget Amendment” press release, <https://arrington.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=1211>, February 9, 2024.

³⁴ Kurt Couchman, “Why incremental adjustments are a better approach to automatic budget enforcement,” Americans for Prosperity, <https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/automatic-budget-enforcement/>, March 23, 2023.

³⁵ Kurt Couchman, “A debt limit deal with something for everyone,” *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/congress-blog/3743468-a-debt-limit-deal-with-something-for-everyone/>, November 20, 2022.