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Congress Increasingly Fails to Budget February 25, 2020

The Congressional budget process calls for an annual budget resolution to make explicit the tradeoffs between discretionary spending, direct spending, revenue, deficits, and debt. Unfortunately, recent Congresses have not adhered to the budget process, and policymakers have instead allowed the federal budget process to virtually collapse.

Among the ways the budget process has broken down:

- **Congress regularly misses budget deadlines.** A concurrent budget resolution is supposed to be approved each year by April 15 (prior to 1986 the deadline was May 15). Since 1975, this deadline has only been met 6 times. The House has only passed its budget resolution 16 times by then and the Senate has only passed a budget resolution by then 20 times.
- **Budget resolutions have become less common.** Between 1975 and 1997, a budget resolution was approved every single year. However, budget resolutions have only been approved 11 out of the last 22 years. Since 2010, only three budget resolutions have been approved, and none has been abided by or implemented in any meaningful way.
- **While the budget process has been breaking down over decades, it has gotten much worse in recent years.** In 2018, for the first time under the modern budget process, neither the House nor the Senate voted on or approved a budget resolution. This failure was repeated in 2019. In other words, there was no budget even considered on the floor for fiscal years 2019 or 2020.
- **Lawmakers appear uneager to follow the budget process.** It has been reported that the House Budget Committee will not consider a budget resolution for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, and the Senate Budget Committee may not either. Given our terrible fiscal situation, with near-record deficits and debt, this is a tremendous abdication of responsibility.

The inability of Congress, especially the Budget Committees, to do their job, leaves the country without an explicit fiscal framework. This failure has made it easier for policymakers to enact [massive debt-increasing legislation](#) without a plan to finance them. Comprehensive budget process reform is badly needed to improve this situation. In the meantime, Congress should follow – rather than ignore – the process currently in place, and unquestionably should work to pass a budget this year.



Budget Breakdown

The Budget Act requires the Senate Budget Committee to report a budget by April 1 and both chambers to agree on a concurrent resolution by April 15 (May 15 prior to 1986). Unfortunately, these deadlines are often missed by the individual chambers, let alone both agreeing.

Of the 45 years since 1975, the House has passed a resolution by the deadline 29 times, the Senate 25 times, and both chambers have agreed to a concurrent resolution on time only six times.

Yet despite these missed deadlines, Congress ultimately put forward a budget resolution every single year between 1975 and 1997.

But since 1998 and especially since 2010, the situation has gotten much worse. Over that time period, Congress has failed to enact a concurrent budget resolution 11 times – 7 times since 2010. In 7 of those years, the Senate did not even pass its own budget resolution; in three years, neither the House nor Senate passed a budget resolution.

Fig. 1: Congressional Failure to Meet Budget Deadlines

Metric	Number of Years Since 1975
Times the House Has Passed a Budget by Deadline*	29
Times the Senate Has Passed a Budget by Deadline*	25
Years Congress Has Met Its Budget Deadline*	6
Years Without a Concurrent Budget Resolution	11
Years Without a Senate Budget	7
Years Without a House Budget	3
Years Neither Chamber Approved a Budget	3
Years Neither Chamber Voted On a Budget	2
Years Neither Budget Committee Approved a Budget	0

Source: Based on tables from the [Congressional Research Service \(alternate link\)](#). *The deadline to complete action on the budget resolution is currently April 15, but it was May 15 prior to 1986.

The past two years were worse still – neither chamber even *considered* a budget resolution on the floor for the first time since the modern budget process was established. And this year, it is possible that neither budget committee will approve a budget, which has never happened in the history of the modern budget process.

To be sure, a number of budget alternatives have been proposed outside of the Budget Committees over the years. The [Republican Study Committee](#), the [Congressional Progressive Caucus](#), and the [Congressional Black Caucus](#) regularly propose their own budgets. In the past, the [Blue Dog Coalition](#) has proposed alternative budgets, though it hasn't in recent years. And in 2012, a bipartisan budget resolution was put forward by [Representative Jim Cooper \(D-TN\)](#) and [former Representative Steve LaTourette \(R-OH\)](#).

While these efforts are important, only a budget resolution approved by both chambers of Congress signals agreement on a fiscal framework. The congressional budget process begins with the chair of each Budget Committee proposing a budget resolution and guiding it through those



committees. The leadership of each chamber must be willing to support the chair at the committee level, to facilitate floor consideration, and to negotiate with the other body.

Fig. 2: The Congressional Budget Process is Collapsing

Fiscal Year	President	House Budget Chair	Senate Budget Chair	Committee Approval		Initial Passage		Conference Report	
				House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate
1999	Clinton	Kasich	Domenici	5/20/1998	3/18/1998	6/5/1998	4/2/1998	-	6/15/1998
2000	Clinton	Kasich	Domenici	3/17/1999	3/19/1999	3/25/1999	3/25/1999	4/14/1999	4/15/1999
2001	Clinton	Kasich	Domenici	3/15/2000	3/29/2000	3/24/2000	4/7/2000	4/13/2000	4/13/2000
2002	Bush	Nussle	Domenici	3/21/2001	-	3/28/2001	4/6/2001	5/9/2001	5/10/2001
2003	Bush	Nussle	Conrad	3/13/2002	3/22/2002	3/20/2002	-	-	-
2004	Bush	Nussle	Nickels	3/12/2003	3/13/2003	3/21/2003	3/26/2003	4/11/2003	4/11/2003
2005	Bush	Nussle	Nickels	3/17/2004	3/12/2004	3/25/2004	3/26/2004	5/19/2004	-
2006	Bush	Nussle	Gregg	3/9/2005	3/10/2005	3/17/2005	3/17/2005	4/28/2005	4/28/2005
2007	Bush	Nussle	Gregg	3/29/2006	3/9/2006	5/18/2006	3/16/2006	-	-
2008	Bush	Spratt	Conrad	3/21/2007	3/15/2007	-	3/23/2007	5/27/2007	5/17/2007
2009	Bush	Spratt	Conrad	3/6/2008	3/6/2008	3/18/2008	3/14/2008	6/5/2008	6/4/2008
2010	Obama	Spratt	Conrad	3/25/2009	3/26/2009	4/2/2009	4/2/2009	4/29/2009	4/29/2009
2011	Obama	Spratt	Conrad	-	4/22/2010	-	-	-	-
2012	Obama	Ryan	Conrad	4/6/2011	-	4/15/2011	-	-	-
2013	Obama	Ryan	Conrad	3/21/2012	-	-	-	-	-
2014	Obama	Ryan	Murray	3/13/2013	3/14/2013	3/21/2013	3/23/2013	-	-
2015	Obama	Ryan	Murray	4/4/2014	-	4/10/2014	-	-	-
2016	Obama	Price	Enzi	3/19/2015	3/19/2015	3/25/2015	3/27/2015	4/30/2015	5/5/2015
2017	Obama	Price	Enzi	3/16/2016	-	1/13/2017*	1/12/2017*	1/13/2017	1/12/2017
2018	Trump	Black	Enzi	7/19/2017	10/5/2017	10/5/2017	10/19/2017	10/26/2017†	10/19/2017†
2019	Trump	Womack	Enzi	6/21/2018	-	-	-	-	-
2020	Trump	Yarmuth	Enzi	-	3/28/2019	-	-	-	-

Source: [Congressional Research Service](https://www.congress.gov), Congress.gov. Congress has only met its budget deadline 3 times in the last 22 years, with the budgets for Fiscal Years 2000, 2001, and 2004.

* For FY 2017, the budget that passed the House and Senate floors was not reported by the Budget Committee. It moved directly to the floor as a “shell budget” with no recommendations except to allow health reform.

† For FY 2018, the House adopted the Senate’s budget rather than a conferenced version.

A Country Needs a Budget

Congress is unlikely to make much of an effort to approve a budget resolution for FY 2021. House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth (D-KY) has [indicated](#) he is unlikely to propose a resolution in committee, let alone take one to the floor and reconcile it with a Senate proposal.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY) [has called for](#) approving a bipartisan budget resolution that would serve as a broad governance document. While this is an admirable goal, it is ambitious given how rare bipartisan budget resolutions are and given the current hyper-partisanship in Washington.

It is clear that the current congressional budget process is broken. Members in both chambers and both parties, and in particular, the leaders of the Budget Committees need to recognize the critical responsibility of budgeting and to recognize the importance of the budget resolution as a tool for setting priorities. That starts with putting forward a budget.