

Mixed Records of Success for Joint Committees

If a camel is a horse designed by a committee, is a duck-billed platypus a duck conceived by a bipartisan, joint committee of Congress? We may soon know.

The Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction is mandated by the Budget Control Act to report by Nov. 23 additional budget savings of at least \$1.5 trillion over the next decade.

Whatever budgetary creature might emerge from the panel is an “endangered species” even before it’s hatched. That’s because Republicans initially vowed not to appoint anyone to the committee who favors raising revenues and Democrats counter-threatened to name no one who would alter entitlement benefits.

It’s hard to shake hands on a final deal when you go into negotiations with both hands already tied behind your back. (That may explain why joint committee appointees subsequently backed off such hard-line rhetoric.)

I was recently asked whether there has been anything in the history of Congress comparable to this Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction. The short answer is, not exactly. We have previously had joint budgetary and reform committees but with different mandates.

The idea for a joint budget committee in Congress first emerged from a presidential Commission on Economy and Efficiency during the administration of President William Howard Taft. It recommended both a single executive budget and a single Congressional budget committee. The ideas died when Taft lost his 1912 re-election bid. Taft’s successor, Woodrow Wilson, vetoed a revival of the executive budget idea in 1920 over the issue of removing the comptroller general. Finally, Wilson’s successor, Warren G. Harding, signed the Budget and Accounting Act into

law in 1921.

After World War II, Congress created a Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress to make recommendations on modernizing the institution. One of its recommendations, adopted as part of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, was for an annual budget resolution setting overall levels of spending and revenues for government.

It was to be formulated by a Joint Committee on the Legislative Budget consisting of all 102 members of the House and Senate Appropriations and Tax committees. That may help explain why it had a very limited run.

As one editorial summarized its three-year existence: “The first year, 1947, they failed to agree; the second, they reached an agreement but failed to abide by it; and the third, they simply gave up trying.”

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It was replaced briefly in 1950 with an omnibus appropriations bill approach that was abandoned a year later as being too large, complex and incomprehensible.

A Joint Study Committee on Budget Control in 1973 recommended creating a Congressional budget process. The joint committee was prompted by a standoff with President Richard Nixon over appropriate deficit levels and presidential impoundments of appropriated funds.

The committee’s recommendations led to enactment of the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974, which required a Congressional budget resolution setting aggregate levels of spending, revenue, debt and deficits. House and Senate Budget committees were created to report the resolutions, with a Congressional Budget Office to provide independent fiscal analyses.

By 1977, with the abolition of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the

Senate swore off creating future permanent joint legislative committees. It was still open to occasional temporary joint committees such as the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress in 1993, modeled after the successful joint Congressional reform committees of 1945 and 1965.

Unlike those predecessor reform committees, however, the joint committee split in two when some House Democratic members demanded reform of the Senate filibuster rule. Consequently, the House and Senate contingents filed separate sets of final recommendations.

The House Rules Committee blocked floor consideration to avoid amendments changing committee jurisdictions. The Senate leadership likewise barred a floor vote on its bill. The joint committee's work fell victim to committee turf sensitivities and interchamber animosities. So it was not surprising that even before members of the Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction were appointed, some Members complained that their committee jurisdictions and prerogatives were being trampled.

While the new law allows committees to submit their recommendations for reductions to the joint committee by Oct. 14, the joint committee is under no obligation to accept any. And while the joint committee's final recommendations are referred to the standing committees, they must then report them without change by Dec. 9, or be subject to discharge.

The joint committee bill will then be put to an up-or-down vote in both chambers no later than Dec. 23. Failure to adopt the joint committee's bill will result in across-the-board spending cuts, with half from defense and half from domestic discretionary and mandatory spending.

The chance that anything will be reported by the joint committee and enacted into law will probably depend on a powerful combination of bipartisan leadership backing (including the president), favorable public opinion and more stock shocks. History is not on its side.

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