Parties, Rules, and the Evolution of Congressional Budgeting

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PREFACE

The congressional budget process adopted in 1974 has been controversial and often messy. Both insiders and outsiders have derided its instability, its lack of controls, its improvisational nature, its contribution to unorthodox lawmaking, its failure to prevent deficits, and its encouragement of budgetary tricks and gimmicks—“blue smoke and mirrors”—to make it look as if Congress was doing something that it was not. But is that an accurate judgment, taking the longer view of its thirty-year performance? In fact, despite its many failures, the budget process has been an integral part of sweeping changes in Congress as an institution and in Congress’s legislative capacity. It has changed not only the way in which Congress budgets but also how major taxing and spending issues are negotiated between executive and legislative branches. The creation of “macrobudgeting” in Congress altered the way budget choices were framed and, with it, the kinds of coalitions that would organize to support or oppose those choices. Congressional budgeting rules have facilitated the increase of partisanship and the changing role of legislative parties and leaders.

Restructuring of the budget process in 1974 was first and foremost a change in rules and congressional institutions. Those budget rules continued to adapt and develop over time and affect other critical congressional institutions such as committees and parties. From the time the budget process was first implemented in 1975, the relationship between budget rules and congressional parties was a fascinating one. At the time, parties in Congress were not receiving much scholarly attention. In the 1980s, budget issues took center stage on the national policy agenda, and burgeoning deficits during an era of divided government restored interest in party control and budgeting. By the 1990s, the role of parties in Congress and the consequences of divided government were increasingly the subject of theory and research.

Scholarship on Congress has also changed in the past thirty years, from predominantly sociological approaches to economic approaches based on instrumental rationality. The “New Institutionalism,” both formal and historical variants, has fostered theoretical progress by focusing on legislative institutions and their consequences. Perhaps because of the influence of scholars such as David Mayhew and Richard Fenno, formal and nonformal approaches coexist more easily in congressional studies and allow a certain
theoretical and methodological pluralism. In taking a historical institutional approach to congressional budgeting, recent work on rules, parties, and divided government provided important insights.

My interest in this subject began when I was a graduate student at The Ohio State University, during the battles between President Nixon and Congress over the federal budget. Although I have periodically left the subject for long periods of time, my interest in it has never completely waned. The enactment of the Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 provided an opportunity to study institutional changes and policy results. After “soaking and poking” and interviewing Budget Committee members, I published *The Fiscal Congress: Legislative Control of the Budget* in 1980. Such interviews would be increasingly difficult to find. I went back to the Hill at the time of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings to study that fascinating experiment. Since then, I have long envisioned a study of the evolution of congressional budgeting. After various administrative posts and international research and consulting activities, this project finally came to the front burner in 2003.

The premise of the book is that macrobudgeting fundamentally changed the way in which congressional budget choices were framed and enacted. Macrobudgeting not only increased the political stakes for the parties but also created a set of rules and procedures that strengthened party leaders, reflected in a steady increase in partisanship. With budgeting increasingly partisan, divided government has taken on increased significance as well.

The approach chosen to explain the evolution of congressional budgeting was to examine in detail landmark budget legislation since 1974, from the Budget Act itself to the recent Bush tax cuts. Each step in the progression allows an assessment of institutional changes, the role of parties, and relations with the president. The concluding chapter assesses congressional budget rules and party leaders and party voting, and it examines the consequences of divided government.

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