

Unlikely allies pitch major overhaul of Congress' budget rules

By Sarah Ferris - 02/26/2018 12:01 AM EDT

As lawmakers set out this week on a landmine-ridden mission to mend Congress' spending cycle, a group of strange bedfellows in Washington has given them a head-start.

Roughly two-dozen D.C. influencers — ranging from leaders of the Chamber of Commerce to the Center for American Progress — unveiled on Monday their own set of recommendations to end the stop-and-go pattern of spending on Capitol Hill.

The report is a product of a yearlong project called Building a Better Budget Process. Its release comes just as Congress launches its own budget process reform panel, tasked with drafting a set of possible solutions by November.

This outside group's recommendations revolve around one major idea: shifting Congress into a two-year cycle for all major fiscal decisions. They propose that at the start of every Congress, lawmakers and the White House should strike a deal on a single budget plan that sets spending levels and adjusts the debt ceiling.

It would essentially “synchronize the budget cycle with the electoral cycle,” the group writes in its 24-page report.

The group argues that statutory deadlines are no longer enough to prompt Congress to pass bills on time. Instead, the group acknowledged elections are the “one true driver of congressional action.”

The report also calls for the federal government to release a “Fiscal State of the Nation” report every four years — putting the issue top-of-mind just before a presidential election. It would also restructure the House and Senate Budget committees, allowing for more cooperation with the minority party.

The result, the influencers say, is a “process that is cognizant of but less bound up in politics, is more predictable, and encourages Congress to pass budgets and appropriate funds on time.” The group announced its report at the first annual Budget Process Summit, hosted by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. The event will also feature remarks from two

members of the Senate Budget Committee, David Perdue (R-Ga.) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.).

The report, with supporters across the political spectrum, could help influence Congress' efforts to reform the budget cycle this year. A special congressional panel was created this month as part of the massive, largely unpopular spending deal that raised spending caps for two years and lifted the debt ceiling.

The outside group has already briefed key lawmakers, including Senate Budget Chairman Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.), who is likely to be picked for the panel, and Rep. John Yarmuth (D-Ky.), who was named to the panel on Friday, according to a person familiar with the talks.

"This may actually guide what's in the budget agreement," the person said.

The creator of the outside group called its set of proposals "practical and widely supportable."

"Rarely has a group as politically diverse as the [Building a Better Budget Process] participants agreed on anything," said Robert Ferstl, president of the nonprofit Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.

The talk of budget reform has been ongoing in Congress for nearly a decade, though it took on fresh urgency this year after two government shutdowns in two months alongside an endless series of fiscal cliffs.

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