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SENATORS SUGGEST KILLING BUDGET PANELS

Joseph Lawler May 11, 2016, 1:10 PM
Senators trying to overhaul the “broken” congressional budget process are toying with the idea of eliminating the Budget Committee.

Speaking at an event in Washington Wednesday, Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., discussed the possibility of dissolving the Budget Committee that he heads. Agreeing with him was Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., the Democrat taking a leading role on the committee while ranking member Bernie Sanders of Vermont is on the presidential campaign trail.

The two senators have been working on a bipartisan overhaul of the budget process, an effort born of Congress' failures in recent years to pass budgets and the reliance on last-minute spending deals hammered out in negotiations between the two parties' leadership teams.

The role of the Budget Committee has been diminished, Whitehouse argued, noting that the majority of government spending is “beyond the purview of the current Budget Committee,” including mandatory spending on programs such as Social Security and Medicare, as well as “tax expenditures,” or targeted tax breaks that effectively work as spending.

Whitehouse said “it really takes us to a point where I think we're having a serious conversation within the committee that, as its topline, asks: 'Should there even be a budget committee, or is it just a waste of everyone's time?'“

Later, he explained that the effort is intended not to address major fiscal questions such as the future of Social Security, but just to reform the Budget Committee.

“Or eliminate it if we have to,” interjected Enzi.

“Or eliminate it, if we have to,” Whitehouse agreed.

Both senators aired a number of complaints about the current process. It often makes it hard for the party in the majority to pass a budget, creating an opportunity for the minority party to criticize them for political purposes. It places mandatory programs beyond the budget process. It empowers the president

and congressional negotiators involved in a big deal, rather than Congress as a whole.

The senators had particular criticism for the current process' "vote-a-ramas," which are unlimited symbolic votes on amendments to the budget resolution. Senators use them to force members of the other party to take difficult votes that they can then use on the campaign trail.

The vote-a-rama, which often runs into the early hours of the morning, is a "comedy of mutual insult and demeaning behavior," Whitehouse said.

One reform that Enzi suggested was a move to biennial budgeting, limiting the political games and providing greater certainty about funding to agencies.

Whatever is done, it would need to be done before the fall elections, Enzi said.

"Right now, nobody knows who the president is going to be and nobody knows who the majority in Congress is going to be," he said. "So we can take a very reasonable approach to make sure that we protect the majority and the minority."



The role of the budget committee has been diminished, Sens. Mike Enzi and Sheldon Whitehouse say. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

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