

NATIONAL REVIEW

A BRAC-Like Solution to Stabilize the Debt

Veronique de Rugy

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The current federal budget process is turning 50 next year. Unfortunately, it hasn't aged well. In fact, if we judge these 1974 budget rules by how often Congress has followed them, they have been a complete failure. In only four of the 49 years since the budget process has been in place has Congress passed a budget on time through the regular order. In 17 of these 49 years, Congress didn't even bother to pass a budget at all.

Now, in all fairness to the 1974 budget process, the fault lies strictly with legislators who have for decades refused to follow the rules. These legislators are the ones who, Congress after Congress after Congress, have broken the rules with impunity. This record seems even more shocking when considering that passing a budget is a core responsibility of Congress. But maybe the worst part of this mess is that no one seems to care, save for the small community of budget scholars who have been repeating for years that the budget process is broken. I think it's more accurate to say that what's broken is Congress.

Speaking of the small community of budget scholars trying to draw attention to our fiscal problem, Cato Institute's Romina Boccia has been writing about a well-designed commission, modeled after the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC), that could help with the political inability to reform Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. I don't need to remind the Corner's readers that these three programs are the drivers of our future debt. Addressing their insolvency is key to putting the U.S. on a sustainable fiscal path. Here's what I wrote last week about the idea:

This commission would be staffed with independent experts appointed by the president. It would be "tasked with a clear and attainable objective, such as stabilizing the growth in the debt at no more than the GDP of the country, and empowered with fast-track authority, such that its recommendations become self-executing upon presidential approval, without Congress having to affirmatively vote on their enactment," Boccia explains. . . .

What's more, Congress would retain some veto power. If they disapprove of the proposal, the House and Senate can reject it through a joint resolution within a specified period. Whether it's the best solution to address our fiscal problems remains to be seen, but it's worth considering.

I like the idea a lot. But while writing about it, I also wondered the danger of turning so much power over to “experts,” especially “experts” chosen by the president. As it turns out, I had nothing to worry about. As Boccia wrote to me after my piece was published:

I suggest to congressional staffers exploring this idea that select members of Congress (leadership and the chairs of the budget committees) nominate members along with the President, and that the Senate should confirm all members (to avoid extremists or detractors through consent).

For BRAC, the President was supposed to appoint the commission members after consultation with Congress and the Senate still had to confirm them. See this CRS report for details: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RS22061.pdf>

I was thankful for this info and for the reminder about the original BRAC process. Boccia’s idea to use a BRAC-like solution to fix various problems isn’t new, but it is an important addition to the many proposals offered by scholars about how to address the entitlements crisis. The beauty of this proposal over many others is that it focuses on the most difficult obstacle faced by anyone who wants to reform these three programs: the political-economy problem.

You can read Boccia’s proposal [here](#), and if you are interested in all things related to the budget and debt, you should subscribe to the *[Debt Dispatch](#)*.