



Balancing the federal budget: A (not so) new approach

Paul A. Gosar

April 2, 2015

“I wish it were possible to obtain a single amendment to our constitution; I would be willing to depend on that alone for the reduction of the administration of our government to the genuine principles of its constitution. I mean an additional article taking from the federal government the power of borrowing.”—Thomas Jefferson, 1798

Congress has adjourned for its Easter recess, following the showdown to pass a budget, and like me, many members will be hosting town halls in their districts over the next two weeks. From my experience, I can guarantee that in the majority of these local meetings the biggest theme to surface will be the frustration with Washington’s stagnation and gridlock, and the failure of the federal government to stop out-of-control spending. The mood at these meetings often borders on hopelessness when the subject of fiscal responsibility comes up.

It’s understandable that many Americans have distrust with regard to Washington’s desire to rein in this insanity. After all, Congress has abysmal approval ratings (**the most recent Real Clear Politics average is 17.7%**), and a primary reason is its contribution to our massive national debt. In late 2014, America’s federal debt eclipsed **\$18 trillion**. Let that sink in. That amount of money is nearly incomprehensible for most Americans. It equates to over \$150,000 for every American taxpayer. The power to borrow has brought the United States to the precipice of fiscal calamity, yet our government still continues to live beyond its means. While these may be just numbers on a page to some, they represent a grave threat to our country’s safety. In September 2011, then Joint Chiefs Chairmen Admiral Mike Mullen called our national debt—at that time \$14 trillion—**the biggest national security issue facing America**.

Over the years, members of Congress have tried in vain to right our fiscal ship by introducing numerous balanced budget amendments. I have supported almost all of these, but unfortunately, there has never been enough agreement to make these efforts reality. The toxic, vitriolic environment in Washington has almost ruined any chance of balancing the budget through congressional action. Both parties have recklessly spent the people’s money, and there is no sign they will agree on a remedy to this madness anytime soon.

As such, we need to take a different approach. Our Founders had uncanny foresight into the pitfalls that could ensnare our republic at the federal level and provided a way for states to amend our supreme law. Article V of the Constitution allows states to pass an amendment when three-fourths of them agree to do so. I have recently **introduced legislation that would facilitate this process through an Article V convention of the states**. Using an agreement among the states called an “interstate compact,” H.Con.Res.26, Effectuating the Compact for a Balanced Budget, treats our nation’s spending problem as the constitutional crisis it is and advances a powerful balanced budget amendment.

My legislation initiates this agreement and ensures that the state-initiated constitutional amendment process advances a balanced budget amendment and nothing else. Possibly the most attractive feature of this innovative approach is that it *does not* require the president’s signature. And while the Compact does require congressional consent to work, such consent is achieved by simple majority passage of a resolution, which consolidates everything Congress must do into a turnkey process. This approach ensures this constitutional convention deals *only* with a balanced budget amendment, and includes the necessary safeguards to *prevent* a runaway convention of the states.

The Compact for a Balanced Budget Amendment currently has 15 cosponsors in the House and is endorsed by **Americans for Tax Reform**, the Cato Institute, and The Federalist Society. Four states—Alaska, Georgia, North Dakota, and Mississippi—have already passed legislation to join the Compact, and at least eight more have signaled they will follow suit. Momentum is building nationwide for this worthwhile effort.

Our founding document begins with three words: “We the People.” As foreign as the idea may seem in 21st century America, the United States is still a government *of the people*. It’s time for the people—through the states—to exercise their power and rein in reckless federal spending; it’s time we put the priorities of our children and grandchildren ahead of the priorities of out of touch Washington politicians; it’s time we stand up to special interest groups and finally pass a balanced budget amendment that will actually balance the budget. That’s the message I will be taking to my town halls.