

Subject: Balanced Budget**Text:**

“The legislative branch shall each year authorize government expenditures consistent with expected revenue. In any fiscal year, government expenditures shall not exceed the average of annual government revenue for the past three years, with two exceptions: if the previous fiscal year had three quarters of negative growth, or if Congress declares, by two-thirds majority in each chamber, a ‘Budget State of Emergency.’

“If Congress fails to pass a balanced budget by the beginning of a fiscal year, or if Congress declares a ‘Budget State of Emergency,’ one third of the Members of the House of Representatives from each party and one third of Senators from each party shall be chosen by lot (or, in the case of parties with fewer than three Members of Congress, one Member of that party shall be chosen). Representatives and Senators so selected shall be removed from office with immediate effect and replaced in elections to be held within three months of their removal.”

Reform Category(ies):

- ☒ Anti-Corruption, Transparency, Accountability
- ☐ Counter-Majoritarian Requirements
- ☒ Democratic Processes
- ☐ Enhanced Rights/Protections
- ☐ Limits to Political Power/Immunities
- ☐ Necessary Clarifications
- ☒ Responsible Government
- ☐ Separation of Powers/Check and balances

Branch(es) targeted:

- ☒ Legislative ☐ Executive ☐ Judicial

Justification:

Members of Congress know they can get away with financial profligacy because citizens don't pay sufficient attention to identify the real culprits and influential private sector actors have, in recent decades, preferred the sugar high of deficit spending to counseling fiscal restraint.

While both parties have saddled future generations with debt, the Republican party has been particularly cynical; its rhetorical homage to fiscal responsibility is a fraud. Recent Republican Administrations have, in general, been less restrained about aligning spending with revenue, while Republican-controlled Congresses rediscover austerity during Democratic Presidential terms.

The virtue of this amendment text is that it imposes consequences on the branch capable (all by itself) of producing balanced budgets, but doesn't change the partisan make-up of Congress arbitrarily.

The random process of removing a third of Congress is a feature, not a bug. There would be no practical way to otherwise separate virtuous from venal legislators. A randomized threat may also be a better stimulant than if learned helplessness results from the prospect of certain dismissal – as with the purported “Buffett Amendment,” which would bar all Members from seeking reelection at certain debt levels. (We oppose the “Buffett Amendment” as it is most commonly ascribed, since the simultaneous firing of every Representative and every Senator would produce chaos.)

Importantly, our amendment would still allow Members of Congress to authorize counter-cyclical deficit spending during serious economic crises without imperiling their jobs. Our amendment would match spending with the average of the last three years of government expenditures. (Some Republican plans suggest an average of the last seven years, but that is a ploy to lower government spending, especially if not inflation-adjusted.)

Alternatives to Amendment?

In a better world than this, Congress would pass balanced budgets on its own, overriding Presidential vetoes as necessary. In this one, our amendment proposal is a blunderbuss meant to recall them to their duty, even if they ultimately rediscover a commitment to fiscal prudence only in order to fight off the amendment's ratification.