

Written Testimony of The Honorable Rob Portman
September 21, 2026

House Budget Committee Hearing: Field Hearing:
"America's Fiscal Future: Examining the Need for a Fiscal
Commission"

Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member Boyle, thank you for inviting me to testify on this necessary and timely topic.

Throughout my career, I have spent a large part of my time working on the federal budget, including as a member of this Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee, the Senate Budget and Finance Committees, and the Joint Economic Committee. I also served on the 2011 Super Committee, which was tasked with finding bipartisan savings. In each of these roles, I saw firsthand what you have seen: the flaws in the congressional budget and appropriations process and the inability of Congress to address our long-term fiscal challenges.

Between my service in the House and Senate, I was privileged to serve as Director of the Office of Management and Budget in the George W. Bush Administration. There, I saw the fiscal challenges from the executive branch's perspective.

My experience has led me to conclude that we have to try something radically different. Congress and the American

people need a better tool to understand our fiscal situation and develop a path toward long-term budget stability. That is why I believe a commission with members of Congress and outside experts can help find solutions to a complex and politically divisive issue.

I applaud the leadership and members of this Committee for taking the lead in addressing our fiscal challenges. I appreciate the many members who have cosponsored legislation offering creative approaches to this problem. I especially appreciate Representatives Huizenga and Peters for their leadership on the [Fiscal Commission Act](#), as well as the bipartisan group of Budget Committee members who have cosponsored the legislation. I also appreciate Representatives Peters and Panetta for co-sponsoring the [Budgeting for a Better America Act](#), which includes a fiscal commission.

The Economic Challenge

Members of this Committee are well aware of the fiscal challenges we face, but I want to highlight why the economic consequences prove the need for a commission.

Social Security's insolvency comes at a time when there is strong public and congressional resistance to reducing benefits. I recognize the importance of Social Security and its success in preventing senior poverty, but its long-term deficits are

unsustainable. Relative to the size of the economy, spending on Social Security is projected to increase from [5.2 percent to 6 percent of GDP](#) over the next thirty years, while revenues remain close to their historical average of 4.5 percent. A fiscal commission can provide a forum to develop solutions that address the program's long-term finances while limiting the economic impact on seniors and the workers who finance benefits.

But Social Security is part of a broader fiscal challenge. The United States now has approximately \$40 trillion in federal debt. Long-term financing of Social Security's shortfalls from the general fund would add pressure to an already difficult fiscal trajectory. At the same time, the CBO projects net interest on the debt will become the largest federal spending category in 2048. Without legislative action, our fiscal trajectory will also constrain the government's ability to respond to future economic needs.

The problem is not only long-term. Inflation concerns and rising Treasury yields are already putting pressure on federal borrowing costs. Recently, the 10-year Treasury note briefly reached [5.05 percent](#), its highest yield since 2007. As federal debt continues to rise, higher borrowing costs will make it increasingly expensive for the government to finance that debt. These challenges will test the limits of congressional partisanship. We cannot remain paralyzed while deficits grow

and the burden on younger generations increases. At the same time, we must protect programs that are vital to millions of seniors.

Challenges Our Elected Officials Face

Commissions can provide an important tool for addressing difficult policy challenges while improving the relationship between policy, elected officials, and the public.

Polling shows that voters recognize the need for bipartisan action on fiscal issues. In 2024, the Peter G. Peterson Foundation found that roughly [eight in ten](#) voters agreed that a bipartisan fiscal commission could strengthen Social Security and benefit the economy. That is a good start.

At the same time, voters can be much less supportive when asked about specific reforms. According to Pew Research, [79 percent](#) of U.S. adults said Social Security benefits should not be reduced in any way. This illustrates the challenge elected officials face: Americans can recognize the need to address the fiscal problem while opposing individual changes that may be necessary to solve it.

That is why bipartisan ownership matters. Recent legislative successes demonstrate the potential of bipartisan cooperation. When the House and Senate passed the 21st Century ROAD to

Housing Act in a substantially bipartisan way, public support modeled it. [89 percent](#) of registered voters supported the bill, according to the National Association of Realtors.

A commission can bring members of both parties into the process and require them to share responsibility for difficult decisions. Rather than placing the political responsibility for reform on one party or one administration, a bipartisan commission can create broader ownership of the solution.

Commission Structure

While there are many valid ways to structure a commission, I believe this challenge would be best addressed by a statutory commission with a clear fiscal goal that includes both elected officials and outside experts, with members selected by congressional leadership.

Congressional participation is essential because Congress will ultimately have to act on the commission's recommendations. Outside experts are also valuable because they can bring technical expertise and perspectives that may not be represented within Congress.

For example, a 16-member commission could include eight members of Congress and eight outside experts, with members of both parties represented in each group. Four congressional

members from each party could be selected by House and Senate leadership, with the outside experts similarly selected with bipartisan balance. Others have suggested a greater proportion of members to increase congressional buy-in. That is ultimately for Congress to determine, but I believe outside experts, including those who understand the political realities of policymaking, would strengthen the process.

Some may also suggest that the President should appoint members. I understand the importance of bringing the Administration into the process, but I would be concerned that the partisan balance would be skewed.

The staff should also be bipartisan. A bipartisan staff would help ensure that both parties have confidence in the commission's analysis and recommendations.

The first role of the Commission should be to outline the enormous fiscal situation we face in a clear, nonpartisan manner so that the American people can better understand the challenge we face, and in particular, why it matters to them. Unless and until your constituents appreciate the need to act, it will be impossible to enact the changes needed.

Finally, the commission needs a timely and organized process for congressional consideration. Ideally, the law authorizing the

commission would provide for an up-or-down vote on the commission's final package.

By bringing together elected officials and experts, ensuring bipartisan representation, and presenting Congress with a unified package of goals rather than individual policies, Congress can create a commission that is durable and effective.

Past Successes

Greenspan Commission

The Greenspan Commission provides an important historical example of bipartisan action on Social Security. The commission's 1983 reforms included both benefit and tax changes and produced substantial improvements in Social Security's finances. The reforms were estimated to save approximately [\\$165 billion](#) over seven years. Public confidence in Social Security also increased following the reforms, from [roughly one-third](#) of Americans before the agreement to about one-half afterward.

The commission's history, however, was not as clean or organized as it is sometimes remembered. After the commission reached an impasse, a small group of negotiators worked directly with the White House and congressional leaders to develop a compromise that the commission ultimately approved.

That experience demonstrates that commissions do not eliminate politics. Difficult reforms will always require political negotiation. What a commission can do is create the attention, expertise, and bipartisan framework necessary to make that negotiation possible.

The need for that kind of action is even greater today. The last time Social Security approached insolvency, debt held by the public was approximately [30 percent of GDP](#). Today, it is roughly 100 percent of GDP.

Greenspan therefore provides two lessons. First, bipartisan action can produce difficult but durable reforms. Second, congressional ownership of the process is essential.

Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC)

The Base Realignment and Closure process, or BRAC, provides another useful example. Closing military bases through the normal congressional process was extremely difficult because individual members had strong incentives to protect bases in their districts. Despite those challenges, Congress established five BRAC rounds, the most recent in 2005. The Congressional Research Service estimates that each round produced an average of approximately [\\$12 billion](#) in savings.

The structure of BRAC offers an important lesson. After recommendations were made, Congress considered the package through an up-or-down vote rather than allowing members to amend individual base closures.

Individual members could support the overall goal while avoiding responsibility for choosing which individual bases would close. The result was a process that allowed Congress to make difficult decisions that would have been much harder to make one at a time.

That is an important lesson for a fiscal commission. The process must have clear rules, bipartisan participation, and a mechanism that prevents Congress from simply reopening every individual recommendation.

How to Ensure This Is Different From Simpson-Bowles

The Simpson-Bowles Commission was often cited as a total failure, but many of its recommendations were ultimately enacted, including savings on discretionary spending. However, fewer of the commission's proposed reforms to revenues and mandatory programs were enacted, particularly in areas that were politically difficult.

One important lesson from Simpson-Bowles is the importance of Congressional buy-in from the beginning.

Simpson-Bowles was created by executive order, giving the Administration a particularly prominent role in the process. A new fiscal commission should instead give Congress a central role from the outset, allowing members of both parties to share ownership of the recommendations and be required by statute to take up the findings.

Congressional involvement also creates political accountability. If members of both parties participate in developing the package, neither party can simply characterize the recommendations as belonging to the other.

A successful commission should therefore learn from both Greenspan and Simpson-Bowles: bring elected officials into the process early, use outside expertise to develop the options, maintain bipartisan staff and membership, and require Congress to take up the final package.

Conclusion

The longer we wait to address our fiscal challenges, the more difficult the choices will become. Delaying action does not eliminate the economic consequences. It shifts more of the burden into the future and gives policymakers fewer options. Some of the reforms necessary to put the country on a sustainable fiscal path will be difficult and unpopular. But a

bipartisan process can give elected officials a better opportunity to explain those choices to the American people and build the understanding necessary to sustain them.

I strongly believe that a commission can create an arena for difficult decisions and build the public understanding necessary to sustain them.

I want to thank you again for inviting me here today. More importantly, I want to thank you for your willingness to take on a fiscal challenge that becomes more difficult every year we wait to address it. Your willingness to consider new approaches, including a bipartisan fiscal commission, is important.

By supporting these solutions, this Committee has an opportunity to demonstrate that Congress can still come together to address difficult challenges.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.