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Recommendations for Improving the Budget and Appropriations Process:
A Look at the Work of the Joint Select Committee

Testimony to the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

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Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Graves, and Members of the Select Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I would like to share some perspectives on the work of the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform, which I was privileged to Co-Chair last year. I look forward to a productive discussion.

Many Members of the House have voiced frustrations about the broken budget process. Our current budget process was written in the 1970s and has been updated with very minor revisions on a few occasions. It does not align with the dynamics of the modern Congress. Last year, the Joint Select Committee was tasked with producing legislation to reform the budget process, with an equal number of Republicans and Democrats and a supermajority voting threshold. That supermajority was 5 Republicans and 5 Democrats – 10 total out of 16 Members – but still a requirement of 5 Members from each party. This structure guaranteed a consensus-driven work product.

We ultimately produced a bipartisan, bicameral package of reforms. Some highlights of the bill are: moving to a biennial budget, while maintaining annual appropriations and annual reconciliation; ensuring realistic deadlines for Congress to complete its budget and appropriations work; and requiring a joint Budget Committee hearing on the fiscal state of the nation.

Why did we fail? We obtained bipartisan and bicameral support for a number of proposals, but the final vote didn't reach the required supermajority threshold. Some Members voted "no," and some voted "present." A number of those Members indicated support for the underlying bill but voted present due to an unrelated disagreement among Senate leaders. However, the final proposal was developed with input from all the Members, the Co-Chair agreed to the base text, and additional amendments were added in the markup with a supermajority vote – some with a unanimous vote. Bipartisan ideas were found, and those proposals should continue to be explored by future reformers.

Besides examining the budget and appropriation process, I was also pleasantly surprised that Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate came into our deliberations to talk about the debt.

To be clear: our group did not try to identify policies to reduce the deficit by a certain amount. What we did discuss extensively is the fact that Congress does not use its existing procedures to reduce the debt. We could use regular order or reconciliation – but we don't. Members expressed interest in a third route, perhaps one that is bipartisan and bicameral, and with debt to GDP as the target metric. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, in particular, was a leader in provoking our thinking in this area.

So, what should this Committee do now? Since it is football season, I would encourage you to obtain some first downs, rather than throwing a Hail Mary for a touchdown. The Joint Select Committee work product represents a bipartisan and bicameral step forward for incremental reform.

Second, we should continue to focus on budget **process**, not budget **outcomes**. Outcomes are specific levels of funding, or proposals to reduce the deficit by a certain amount. Process is how Congress determines how much to spend, or how to determine what policies to enact to reduce the deficit. I would like to see us modernize our procedures, which will hopefully set up Congress for success, regardless of who is in the majority at any given time.

My goal is to get something enacted into law that improves our process. I am willing to work with both Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate to try to do so. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the Senate in this puzzle. In that vein, I congratulate Chairman Mike Enzi for releasing a series of budget and appropriations reform ideas earlier this summer.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today.