

Background

What is the schedule for the federal budget process?

FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS

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A. The congressional budget process is meant to last from early February to the end of June, but recent years have seen delays at each stage, particularly in passing congressional budget resolutions and in completing action on appropriation bills.

The congressional budget process begins each year with the president submitting a budget for the following fiscal year. Usually, Congress receives the budget no later than the first Monday in February. The whole procedure is supposed to be completed by June 30, but that almost never happens.

Within the six weeks following submission, the various congressional committees report to the House and Senate budget committees, outlining how their spending and revenue proposals will differ from the president's budget. After each budget committee compiles this information, Congress is supposed to pass a concurrent budget resolution by April 15.

From fiscal 1976 (the first effective year of the budget process) through 1998, Congress successfully passed budget resolutions each year. Failure to pass a budget resolution has recently become more common, however. Indeed, the longest period without a budget resolution passed by the whole Congress lasted from fiscal 2011 through fiscal 2015.

After the budget resolution passes, the House Appropriations Committee may begin the appropriations process. If a budget resolution is not passed by May 15, however, the House Appropriations Committee may begin appropriations in its absence. All necessary appropriations bills are supposed to be passed by June 30 but seldom are.

Congress occasionally uses a special procedure called reconciliation to fast-track revenue and spending legislation. Reconciliation bills are supposed to be complete by June 15.

If appropriations are not complete by October 1—and that is common—federal agencies are funded under continuing resolutions. These typically cover spending for only part of a year but Congress sometimes extends them to cover the whole fiscal year. Continuing resolutions are generally understood to limit spending to last year's level, but specific programs can be adjusted up and down.

In 2018, neither house of the Congress plans any attempt to formulate a budget resolution for fiscal 2019. As noted above, the entire Congress has often failed to pass a resolution, but the Budget Committee of one house or the other has always approved a resolution. This is the first time since the budget process was enacted in 1974 that neither house has even attempted to work on one.

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Further Reading

Schick, Allen. 1995. *The Federal Budget: Politics, Policy, Process*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press.

Stone, Chad. 2014. "The Federal Budget Process." In *Public Economics in the United States*, vol. 2, edited by Steven Payson, 679–98. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.