



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 12, 2018

House Failed Vote for a “Balanced Budget Amendment” Simply Political Theater

The vote taken Thursday by the House of Representatives on a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution to require a balanced federal budget is what can be dismissed as “political theater.” In other words, it is all an act, designed to allow members of Congress to tell their constituents that they are getting serious about restraining the growth of the national debt. [The vote was 233-174, falling short of the necessary two-thirds vote needed to pass the House.](#)



In what ways was the vote simply a sham, an act? First of all, it was never going to get the two-thirds vote required to send the proposal to the state legislatures for ratification. While the Republicans in Congress *pretend* not to like “excessive” federal spending, the Democrats generally brag about spending (or as they like to call it, “investments”). The Republicans knew going in that they could cast a vote for the Balanced Budget Amendment, and it not actually pass — because enough Democrats could be expected to vote against it. Even if the bill had miraculously cleared the House, the Senate would have killed it.

This is reminiscent of Republicans voting multiple times to repeal ObamaCare, until they actually had the votes to do it. With this vote, Republicans can tell naïve conservative constituents that they are “fighting spending,” while Democrats can tell liberals in their districts that they successfully stopped cuts in social spending.

It is all theater. As Congressman Mark Meadows of North Carolina said, “No one on Main Street is going to take this vote seriously.”

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Secondly, the terms of the proposed Balanced Budget Amendment (BBA) make it ridiculously easy to circumvent. Found within the BBA is the provision that the entire balanced budget can be set aside if “three-fifths of the whole number of each House of Congress shall provide by law for a specific excess of outlays over receipts by a rollcall vote.”

The balanced budget could also be circumvented in any fiscal year if a declaration of war is in effect. While this sounds reasonable, the BBA also allows a waiver if the Congress, by simple majority vote in a joint resolution, decides the U.S. is engaged in a military conflict which causes an imminent and serious threat to national security.

Considering that the United States has been engaged in military conflict, without interruption, since 2001, and is always talking about bombing this or that country, or that some foreign leader is always “the next Hitler,” we could expect an annual waiver to occur for the BBA.

Were a BBA to actually become part of the Constitution, would Congress balance the budget by cutting



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spending — or by raising taxes? As The Weekly Standard warned, this could very well lead Congress to raise taxes and spending “together in perpetuity.”

Another problem with the BBA is that it yet again proposes to delegate more power to the executive branch. The BBA prohibits the Department of the Treasury from releasing funds in excess of the receipts it collects. In other words, the president could reasonably argue that he is impounding funds from use for certain programs that he disfavors, so as to give ample funding to those programs that he does favor.

Yet another problem with the BBA is that Congress had not followed a rational budget process in several years. As Bill Hahn, the vice president of operations for The John Birch Society (parent organization of The New American), explained recently, instead of lumping everything into one huge and loudly touted “must pass” omnibus appropriations bill, “Congress is supposed to be passing 12 budget resolutions that originate from a request from the president, which is supposed to happen every February. Then Congress debates these and passed them. However, this is only for the discretionary portion of spending, which amounts to about \$1.2 or \$1.3 trillion.”

These 12 budget resolutions are supposed to be passed by October in time for the upcoming “fiscal” year. However, as Hahn elaborated, in the last 40 years, “Congress has passed only four of these bills on time. One in the last 20 years! When bills are not passed on time, Congress comes up with stop-gap measures known as Continuing Resolutions. When they wait too long, they pile a bunch of these Continuing Resolutions into an Omnibus bill.”

And thus, the reason for the “mess” we presently find ourselves in.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the BBA is that it addresses a problem that only exists because Congress habitually votes to spend tax dollars on items that are in no way authorized under the Constitution of the United States. If members of Congress simply followed their oath of office, they would vote for spending only on projects found in the enumerated powers of Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, and the problem of deficit spending and the resulting national debt would be eliminated.

The House Liberty Caucus issued a press release on Wednesday, urging the defeat of the BBA. “Amending the Constitution should not be taken lightly, and inserting an ineffectual fiscal rule that’s easily waived or ignored will erode respect for constitutional restraints and will be worse than having none at all.”

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