

[Opinion](#) | Betsey Stevenson, Columnist

Congress Is Even More Dysfunctional Than It Looks

The political infighting over the next speaker has overshadowed the failure of the US House to pass a budget.


October 13, 2023 at 7:00 AM EDT

By [Betsey Stevenson](#)

Betsey Stevenson is a professor of public policy and economics at the University of Michigan. She was on the president's Council of Economic Advisers and was chief economist at the US Department of Labor.



But can they pass a budget on time? *Photographer: Drew Angerer/Getty Images North America*

 This article is for **subscribers only**.

While the political debate in the US is focused on who will be the next

Get unlimited access today.

Explore Offer →



**Get uninterrupted access to
global news. Cancel
anytime.**

[Claim This Offer](#)

Bloomberg Opinion

Daylight Saving vs. Standard Time? There's No Competition

Why India's Food Is the Best in the World

Walmart Has a Tough Battle Ahead in India

A Better Way to Make Billions From China

Congress did not consider the pros and cons of various programs. Members did not pore over the thousands of pages of agency budget requests to consider whether each government agency has a coherent plan to provide services that the public both wants and benefits from. They did not look at the US's fiscal situation to decide how to balance spending and revenue. They did not consider the growing entitlement programs that leave most government spending outside of the annual budget process.

What Congress did, essentially, was give itself an extension on its homework. It has also given its members a platform to rail against out-of-control spending and growing government debt, even as its actual actions have no impact on either.

It is tempting to argue that Congress has recently become broken, unable to perform one of its most important functions as outlined in the appropriations clause of the Constitution: writing and passing laws that dedicate (or "appropriate") money for specific purposes. In reality, however,

Get unlimited access today.

[Explore Offer](#) →

Get uninterrupted access to global news. Cancel anytime.

And here we arrive at the fundamental problem: Are you still reading this? There's no way around it: The budget process is difficult, yes, but also very boring. Fiscal responsibility, long-term planning, difficult trade-offs – this is what budgeting is all about. Yawn. And it's not just you: Senators and representatives get bored, too. Political drama is so much more fun. Shutdown! Throw out the speaker! Fight for liberty! These dramas are much more entertaining.

If the US is going to address challenges such as the projected inability to meet Social Security and Medicare obligations 10 years from now, the shortage of affordable child care, and the necessary trade-offs that helped America solve and unsolve child poverty, then Congress has to do better. It has to roll up its sleeves and govern.

It's not impossible. The White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) releases a budget every year. It is the work of many people, mostly career government workers, who do roll up their sleeves. Budgeting is a statement of priorities, so people will have different views about which programs are deserving of scarce tax dollars. These need not be angry, hateful debates. They should be polite and recognize that no one gets everything that they want.

Congress likes to complain that the US is spending too much, or spending on the wrong programs. But when it comes to spending, it has largely abdicated its responsibilities. Congress is like a teenager who has failed to clean their room complaining that they can't have friends over because their room is a

Get unlimited access today.

Explore Offer →

**Get uninterrupted access to
global news. Cancel
anytime.**

level (unlike the current debt ceiling, these would actually trigger changes to the deficit). There could be a bipartisan budget committee of wonks that does the work for Congress.

Congress averted a shutdown this time. Yet it now seems to be on a path toward this same crisis in November. Once again, businesses and the government will need to postpone their actual work to do the work of preparing for a shutdown. Once again, there will be speeches and articles about how costly a government shutdown will be. It's past time to end this cycle of government budget dysfunction.

Elsewhere in Bloomberg Opinion:

- [The Federal Deficit Is Just a Math Problem](#): Brooke Sample
- [Bidenomics Is Having an Unusual Effect on Deficits](#): Karl Smith
- [America Needs a Debate Over the Deficit](#): Matthew Yglesias

Want more Bloomberg Opinion? [Subscribe to our newsletter](#) .

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

[Share feedback](#) 

Bloomberg

Get unlimited access today.

Explore Offer →

**Get uninterrupted access to
global news. Cancel
anytime.**

Get unlimited access today.

Explore Offer →