

Chapter 2

Party Rhetoric in Federal Budget Communications

Tammy E. Trimble
Virginia Tech, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores differences in federal budget communication associated with the development and passage of the Federal Budget Resolution for Fiscal Years 1999, 2000, and 2001. While theory suggests that party-based differences within budget communication exist, empirical studies have not yet explored the full extent of these differences. The goal of this research is to illustrate the significant party-based differences in the goals and values communicated by the actors within the federal budget process. These findings inform our understanding of how actors within this key governing process communicate. This understanding will better equip public administrators to engage others in dialogue and debate that facilitates agreement and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

For public administrators, a detailed understanding of the federal budget process is crucial. The federal budget is arguably the most important policy tool in the American political system. In a representative democracy, voters choose representatives to act in their interests, but not as their proxies. A representative democracy by definition connotes a form of government that is responsible to the people and, thus, the budget should be a reflection of the values of society reflected through policy-makers' decisions. Miller and Wamsley posit that the 'budget is a powerful symbol in society and the budget process is an important institution – a political institution providing crucial legitimate authority for our societal structure, for our govern-

ment and governing process' (Miller & Wamsley, 1999). Additionally, Levasseur posits that the budget now serves as the nation's preeminent policy document because it sets forth policy choices that constrain all other policy choices (2005). Kettl (2002, p.3) argues that the budget 'is the one place in American government where almost everything of importance comes together,' while Ippolito (2003) notes that the federal budget has become the focal point of national policy making.

Others have also noted the complex nature of the budget. For example, Rubin (2006) categorized views of budgeting as reformism, incrementalism, bargaining, interest-group determinism, process, and policymaking. It has been noted that the budget has many meanings, including that of a priority-setting document (Rubin, 2006), a plan-

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ning document (Lynch, 1991), a policy document and a prospective statement of expected future revenues and expenditures (Lee, Johnson, & Joyce, 2004, Reed & Swain, 1996), a political statement of scarce resources (Wildavsky, 1984), and as a 'vehicle to achieve sweeping economic and policy changes' (LeLoup, 1986, p.3).

Because the management process associated with the budget process is so complex, by extension the relationships of the actors within this process are necessarily complex. Decoding these relationships provides insight for those involved with the governance process. The objective of my research was to examine the communication associated with the development of the federal budget resolution in order to provide a richer understanding of these relationships. Do these actors express similar goals? Is the speech associated with the budget process similar to other forms of partisan speech? By answering these questions, this research helps us to better understand the workings of this complicated administrative process.

BACKGROUND

Budgeting serves as a mechanism for setting goals and objectives, measuring process toward objectives, for identifying weaknesses or inadequacies in organizations, and for controlling and integrating diverse activities carried out by large bureaucracies, both public and private (Lee, Johnson, & Joyce, 2004). Budgeting is a means for examining how resources have been used previously, analyzing what has been accomplished and at what cost, and for charting a course for the future through allocations. Budget process communication is a means of creating meaning among individuals or actors of differing perspectives and agendas.

Federal budget decisions represent the policies and managerial goals and objectives valued by the constituency as reflected by the electorate and bureaucracy. Tangible examples can be seen in recent political decisions. For example, using

the budget tool of reconciliation, President Barack Obama and the Democratic majority in Congress passed sweeping health care reform. President George W. Bush and the Republican majority in Congress passed multiple tax cuts for the middle class. Also, due in large part to campaign promises made during the 2000 presidential campaign and the 2002 mid-term election, Congress, with Bush's support, passed a drug coverage plan for senior citizens, arguably at the expense of other proposed programs. In each case, the policies demonstrated the values of the majority and demonstrated the goals and values deemed most important at that point in time, be it health care, tax cuts, or reductions in government services.

Partisan political arguments are best defined as communication that is argumentative and is directed at either the opposing political party or member(s) of the opposing party. The partisan political debate surrounding federal budget initiatives is heated and often adversarial in tone. Partisan communication is used by those within the federal budget process (i.e., Members of Congress, Congressional staff, bureaucrats), those affected by the outcomes of the process (i.e., interest groups, citizen groups), and the media to promote the idea of an adversarial American political system – a system consisting of winners and losers. Understanding the impact of partisan political communication is important to the field of public administration as the escalation of partisan politics surrounding the federal budget process arguably contributes to the deterioration of meaningful communication regarding substantive policy and budgetary decisions. This work examines the validity of this anecdotal view.

Previous research has examined the goals and value judgments associated with partisan political communication. For example, Levasseur (2000) identified the conflict between wants-regarding and ideal-regarding rhetoric in federal budget discussions. Kelly (2005) identified the values of public interest and social justice versus private interest and economic prosperity in federal budget

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