
The budgetary process as a political phenomenon has long been a subject of interest for political scientists, but efforts to develop relevant propositions and subject them to rigorous testing through the careful collection and analysis of data have been rare. The bulk of the literature concerning the development and implementation of budgets focuses on the administrative or economic dimensions of the problem; politics enters on occasion only as an unwelcome guest that could not be turned away. In a sense, the “state” of the literature on budgeting is simply one dimension of a passion for irrelevance that has been characteristic of a sizable portion of “research” in political science in this century. For, as puzzling as it may seem, the discipline which is identified by the term “political science” spent a remarkable portion of its time prior to the post-World War II period in excluding the careful and systematic analysis of politics from its area of concern.

Perhaps the aversion for politics in general, and for the politics of the budgetary process in particular, can be explained in part by the concurrent development of political science as a discipline and the rise of the administrative reform movement in the United States. The working hypotheses of the reform movement soon solidified into dogma, and political scientists spent much of their time preaching the gospel of what ought to be, all too often with little attention to how the organism to be reformed actually functioned. Whether an academic discipline should spend a good portion of its time indulging in value judgments about how the phenomena in question “ought” to operate will not be debated here. Certainly we can agree, though, that an accurate understanding of how the object of reform does in fact function is a necessary prerequisite.

Within this framework Professor Wildavsky’s book is a welcome beginning for the study of the budgetary process at the federal level. That a book that can be described accurately as a primer of budget-making can also be described as a major contribution to an understanding of the subject is a sad commentary on the failure of political science to produce meaningful research in this area. Yet The Politics of The Budgetary Process is considerably more than an elementary effort to outline the facts of life about the politics of budget-making. On that score alone it deserves the warm reception it undoubtedly will receive.

Yet the contribution of this piece of scholarship transcends mere description in at least two important ways. First, it marks a clear break from the reform movement assumption that budget matters are primarily things that have to do with administration, and that the “good” budget process is one from which politics is largely excluded. Second, the data that form the backbone of the descriptive portion of the book, drawn largely from interviews and government documents, are imaginatively and effectively organized in a way that has produced a number of concepts that will be of lasting value in the study of the budgetary process. The book goes beyond even these contributions, however,

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in its last two sections in which the preachments of the reform movement in the budget field are subjected to a penetrating critique.

The effort to outline the way in which budgets are made at the federal level occupies about two-thirds of the 192 pages in the main body of the book. This section is occupied with a detailed evaluation of how the major participants in the budgetary process view their task and how they go about accomplishing their objectives. Certainly the author believes that budget-making is central to the political process: "If politics is regarded in part as conflict over whose preferences shall prevail in the determination of national policy, then the budget records the outcome of this struggle." The concern with the politics of the budgetary process is rather narrow, with little focus on relating the budget to the external political system. The titles of the two major chapters concerned with the description of budget-making, "Calculations" and "Strategies," suggest the kind of conceptualization that represents a major contribution to the understanding of the budgetary process in this narrower sense. Calculations, defined as "the series of related factors . . . which the participants take into account in determining the choice of competing alternatives," serve as the conceptual framework of a vivid description, well-laced with pointed examples, of the budgetary process in terms of major points of decision: agency decisions on how much to ask for; Bureau of the Budget decisions on how much to recommend; and Appropriations Committee decisions on how much to give.

A central theme of the chapter on calculations, and one that is highly relevant to the critique at the end of the book, concerns the incredible complexity of the problem that faces budget-makers at the federal level. Out of this discussion comes the concept of the "incremental approach to budgeting," a notion closely related to the concept of incremental change developed by Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindbloom in Politics, Economics and Welfare. Wildavsky is here mainly concerned with showing that the budgetary process is in fact involved with "relatively small increments to an existing base." The flavor of the discussion is indicated by the following: "Budgeting turns out to be an incremental process, proceeding from an historical base, guided by accepted notions of fair shares, in which decisions are fragmented, made in sequence by specialized bodies, and coordinated through repeated attacks on problems and through multiple feed mechanisms." At this point, one begins to realize that Wildavsky, unlike many political scientists and other "budget experts," is highly skeptical of many of the reform proposals concerning the budgetary process.

The concept of "Strategies," defined as "budgetary . . . actions by governmental agencies intended to maintain or increase the amount of money avail-
able to them," moves the analysis more directly into the political arena. The focus is on describing "the behavior of officials engaged in budgeting as they seek to relate their requirements and powers to the needs and powers of others." Close attention is given to "strategies designed to capitalize on the fragmentation of power in national politics."

Here, at the end of the descriptive portion of the book, the scope of the study is made clear for the first time. The analysis is limited to "only those parts of the budget within control of the participants," a restriction which seems a reasonable one considering the complexity of the subject and the absence of research on which to build. The conclusion of the descriptive section also sets the stage for the more controversial portion of the book, in which the major reform proposals in the budget area are re-examined in the light of the preceding factual description of how budget-making actually works.

Unquestioning acceptance of reform-movement "principles" has been subjected to severe criticism in recent political science literature. In general, the questions raised about such doctrines as the "goodness" of nonpartisan elections, elections at large, or a management level merit system have taken the form of an objection to assuming, a priori, that these approaches to government are in fact better than some other set of arrangements. Thus, critics of the reform movement have asserted that what began as hypotheses quickly hardened into dogma without ever being subjected to any test of rigorous research or analysis. The eagerness to prescribe seemed to leave little time for systematic description of how government really operates. Prior to Professor Wildavsky's book, however, very little had been said about the standard reform proposals in the budget area: the comprehensive approach to budgeting, and the "program" as opposed to a "line item" budget. It is here that Professor Wildavsky's study makes its most significant contribution. He criticizes the reform proposals within the framework of his detailed analysis of how the federal budget actually is made. The full implications of budgeting to the political process become most clear at this point. As the author puts it: "Far from being a neutral matter of 'better budgeting,' proposed reforms inevitably contain important implications for the political system; that is, for the 'who gets what' of governmental decisions."

Wildavsky's critique of reform proposals, the focal point of the last two chapters of the book, is in the mainstream of current criticism of the reform movement in general. His objections flow from a belief that budget reform proposals are, above all, political matters, and that most advocates of reform not only fail to recognize this, but also insist on a naive and unrealistic definition of politics. Actually much of the disagreement between reform advocates and their critics originates in sharply contrasting definitions of politics. The

6. P. 63.
7. P. 63.
8. P. 98.
9. P. 123.
10. P. 127.
reformer's definition is essentially normative; politics is viewed as an objective search for the general interest, a scientific probe for the one right way. Such reform doctrines as at-large elections, non-partisanship, and, in the budget area, a comprehensive program budget in the hands of the executive flow from the general interest definition of politics. Political conflict is viewed as bad, as a breakdown in the system in which rational approaches are abandoned in favor of political partisanship. The general interest view comes close to excluding politics altogether as a legitimate activity if it extends beyond a kind of "political man," individualistic, act of voting on election day.

By contrast, Wildavsky sees politics as conflict, as a struggle among groups pursuing contrasting and conflicting goals and objectives. The political process becomes a search for compromise, for accommodation, for adjustment to the realities of political influence. The idea that there is a given objective standard to which all decisions can be referred and pronounced in (or not in) the public interest is challenged. Applied to the budgetary process, the author's preference for the competitive definition of politics is clear: "I am prepared to argue that the partial-view-of-the-public-interest approach is preferable to the total-view-of-the-public-interest approach, which is so often argued as being superior." The point is further illustrated in the statement that: "A partial adversary system in which the various interests compete for control of policy (under agreed upon rules) seems more likely to result in reasonable decisions — that is, decisions that take account of the multiplicity of values involved — than one in which the best policy is assumed to be discoverable by a well-intentioned search for the public interest for all by everyone."  

Wildavsky, then, commits himself to the proposition that the competitive definition of politics is both more in accord with reality and, as he defines it, "better" than the general interest view. Thus he is led to challenge the assumption that a comprehensive program budget is preferable to the "piece-work" line-item or traditional approach. The author assesses, in the light of the realities of the political system at the federal level, the wisdom of the major reforms commonly suggested. The proposal for a Joint Congressional Budget Policy Committee, designed to promote the comprehensive approach, is questioned, and held to be likely to increase the power of conservatives from safe districts vis a vis the President — an "unanticipated consequence" that most who support the proposal probably would not favor. It is argued, furthermore, that unanticipated consequences would likely flow from the implementation of the program budget itself, which Wildavsky contends would: (a) make it more difficult for participants in the process to agree on what constitutes "fair shares"; (b) make it vastly more difficult to carry out required calculations; and (c) significantly alter the distribution of outputs, thus producing fundamental changes in the political process.

11. P. 166.
The point of all this is that budget reforms, so casually proposed, are at best based on an incomplete knowledge of how the budget process actually operates. Furthermore, the extensive investment of time and energy by political scientists in promoting reforms judged to be "best" has evidently left too little time for empirical study of the system for which reform is being proposed. Wildavsky makes clear that the major budget reform proposals, if they were to be fully implemented, would require sweeping change in our political system — change in the direction of concentration of power in the hands of a few, who could then promulgate "coordinated" budget decisions. The author thus concludes that most major reforms proposed to date are both unrealistic and undesirable. He does not say that no improvements in the present budget process are possible; but he calls first for a greatly expanded effort to explain the budget process as a prerequisite to reform.

While Wildavsky does assign to the Bureau of the Budget the major coordinating role in the budgetary process, it might be argued that the bureau's significance is underplayed. In my own research I have been interested in the role of the bureau in attempts to impose greater coordination in the natural resources area. Without question the Bureau of the Budget has tightened its control in this field through several major policy moves in recent years. That this effort has had its affect is best illustrated by the violent reaction in Congress to any attempts to change the status quo in the highly sensitive area of resource politics. In a Senate Public Works Sub-Committee hearing in 1956, Congressman James W. Trimble offered testimony to the effect that:

The Bureau of the Budget has set itself up as a sort of legislative usurper. No Government agency can come to the Congress requesting funds for any project until it has a passport and a visa granted by that agency. We cannot even take a look at a project unless the Bureau of the Budget approves. They are the chief high moguls of these river development programs. No project can come to Congress for appropriations unless the bureau approves. In order for the bureau to determine which thoroughbred, milk-fed, vitaminized project can get to us for consideration, it has set up its own rules. These rules were issued December 31, 1952, and are known as Circular A-47.14

Perhaps the strongest protest to expanding Bureau of the Budget power in the sensitive resource area came from the late Senator Robert S. Kerr during joint hearings before the Senate Committees on Interior and Insular Affairs and Public Works in 1957:

Now, if I interpret that language correctly, Mr. Chairman, it means that under orders from the Bureau of the Budget, they have found a way to supplant congressional action, and will, with a budget directive. They have discovered a means of legislating by administrative order, not only in a field where no legislative directive existed, but even in an area where legislative directive does exist, where the will of the Congress was made plain in its language, but where, by reason of disagreement of the Executive

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with the Legislative, they have substituted Executive decree for legislative enactment and are operating on the basis of the executive decree, to wit, Circular A-47.10

The key point is that there is all too little data available to substantiate or refute the proposition that the Bureau of the Budget is in fact significantly altering the political status quo by extending its coordinating power in the budgetary process. Professor Wildavsky has made a major contribution toward focusing research on the budgetary process and on how it actually operates within the political process. Imaginative conceptualizing and systematic collection and analysis of data could lead to the development for the first time of meaningful theory in this field. Professor Wildavsky's book is a beginning, and a highly successful one. One would hope that many more studies widening and deepening the analysis will follow. Finally, the data presented constitute a powerful argument for pushing the reform effort into the background until more — much more — is known about how the budgetary process actually works.

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LEGAL HISTORY: LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE. By Frederick G. Kempin, Jr.*

Legal History: Law and Social Change is one of a series of new paperbacks, subtitled "Foundations of Law in a Business Society." The aim of the series is to make available a group of "short, convenient, inexpensive and authoritative books written by scholars in their respective fields, systematically covering the subjects of primary interest to all nonprofessional students of the law." Professor Kempin begins by asserting that his book is "about the history of Anglo-American law." The statement is courageous. There are 109 pages of text; to say anything meaningful about "the history of Anglo-American law" in that space would be a minor miracle, especially since Professor Kempin aims at telling no less than "a continued story of the development of the institutions of the law — its courts, juries, judges, and lawyers," while also tracing "the beginnings and development of selected legal concepts."1

In many ways, the author does very well, despite the enormous obstacles that face such a venture. He has succeeded in imposing a kind of order on the chaos of his data. The writing is clean and dignified; the story is told

15. Joint Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and Subcommittee on Flood Control, Rivers and Harbors of the Senate Committee on Public Works, 85th Cong., 1st Sess. at 13 (1957).
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