



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Senator Susan M. Collins

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins

“Raising the Bar for Congress: Reform Proposals for the 21st Century”

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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With enormous problems facing our country and Congress having little to show by way of accomplishments, our witnesses today are right to turn a spotlight on how Congress can accomplish more and bicker less.

A recent analysis by *The Washington Times* reveals that last year marked the least productive session of Congress in more than 60 years. Whether one examines hours of debate, the amount of conference reports produced, or the number of votes taken, the data validate the instinctive frustration many feel about the lack of accomplishments of this Congress.

Like many of our witnesses, I have always believed that bipartisanship and compromise are key to tackling the major problems confronting our nation, whether it's a poor economy, high energy costs, or a \$15 trillion debt. Unfortunately, that seems out of fashion today. Sitting down with those on the opposite side of an issue, figuring out what matters the most to each side, negotiating in good faith, and attempting to reach a solution are actions too often vilified by the partisans on both sides of the aisle.

Perhaps that is one reason the American people are so angry with incumbents and why the public's perception of Congress is so dismal.

And who can blame them for their frustration? Today, we are marking 1050 days since the Senate passed a budget. The Majority Leader has made the stunning statement that he doesn't intend to take up the President's budget, or any other budget, which is a troubling abdication of the Senate's responsibility under the law.

The Congressional Budget Act of 1974, a law written by one of my predecessors, Senator Edmund Muskie from Maine, requires Congress to adopt an annual budget resolution. The budget is critical to controlling spending through binding caps and is essential if we are to rein in a debt that now is virtually the size of our entire economy.

I understand the desire to hold Congress's feet to the fire. Some of the proposals discussed today could help, while others might not be effective. I believe there are several worthwhile reform options that we should consider.

First, let's take up appropriations bills on time prior to the start of the fiscal year and allow each bill to be debated, amended, and considered on its own merits. That would help restore public confidence, lead to more carefully considered legislation, and restore the Senate tradition of free and open debate.

This bad habit of combining all or most of the funding bills into one huge package produces thousands of pages and little time for Members to scrutinize the fine print and trillions in spending.

Second, we need a better understanding of the programs we fund and how they're working -- or not working.

That requires more rigorous and more frequent oversight. That's why I am a co-sponsor of Senator Isakson's bill that would establish a budget for two years rather than one, the approach used by Maine and many other states. Such a schedule would free Congress to devote the off-year to conducting oversight -- together, in a bipartisan way -- on the programs and agencies we fund, regardless of which party is in charge of the executive branch.

More systematic due diligence could produce more bipartisan consensus about needed reforms, program eliminations, and spending reductions -- and even increases. I am grateful that my colleague Senator Isakson is here to discuss his biennial budgeting bill.

Third, I appreciate Senator Coburn's leadership in offering legislation aimed at identifying redundancy and overlap in federal programs. Without better information, Congress will continue to create scores of new programs every year, adding to the thousands that already exist. America can't afford any further delay in creating the transparency that would help us prevent duplication and overlap.

One proposal from the "No Labels" organization that will be discussed today would require Members to go without pay unless we pass a budget and all regular appropriation bills by the October 1 deadline. Our colleagues Senator Heller and Congressman Cooper are presenting this intriguing option. Of course, the power to negotiate a budget through committee and bring it up for a vote on the Senate floor is not equally shared by all Members, no matter how forcefully those of us not in the leadership may advocate for a budget.

My point is that my own determination to pass a budget is motivated by doing what is right for the people of Maine and this nation, but I don't control the Senate agenda.

What would be more effective? Changing the rules to require a budget to be passed before a single appropriations bill could be considered and passing Senator Isakson's biennial budget bill are two worthwhile options that would make a difference.

As Americans tighten their belts in these troubled times, they have less tolerance for a profligate, partisan Congress that avoids the most basic discipline of developing a budget.

Another reform proposal from "No Labels" aims to improve Congressional civility by calling for no negative campaigning against fellow incumbents. I am a firm believer in what I call the "Chafee Rule." When I was a freshman Senator in 1997, Senator John Chafee of Rhode Island advised me never to campaign against those with whom I served. Campaign for your Republican colleagues and go into states with open seats, he counseled, but do not campaign against your Democratic colleagues. It will poison your relationship with them. Great advice.

Nevertheless, the Chafee Rule is distinct from a ban on saying unpleasant or uncomfortable things about the actions of our colleagues. What would such a ban have meant in June 1950? Then, Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith, with Joseph McCarthy sitting two rows behind her, first identified and denounced the Wisconsin Senator's assault on the right to criticize; to hold unpopular beliefs; to protest; and to have independent thought.

Would that be prohibited by the “No Labels” proposal?

Of course, I strongly support efforts to bring more civility to Congress and the potential improvement such civility could bring. Despite rules, bans, and pledges, however, I believe that Members have always been and will always be restrained primarily by their own decency and their commitment to their voters, their country, and our Constitution. I look forward to a discussion today of how we might make our institution work better.