

[hede] A Bipartisan Call for “What Works” Budgeting

[dek] Future Budget Cuts Should Be Guided by Evidence, Not Politics

[blurb] John Griffith and Jitinder Kohli call on Congress and the White House to jointly support a comprehensive, results-oriented review of the federal budget.

By John Griffith and Jitinder Kohli

July 27, 2011

With Washington at an impasse over the national debt, it’s hard to believe Democrats and Republicans can agree on anything these days. But ongoing negotiations have revealed at least one point of bipartisan agreement: Both sides believe Congress should base future budget cuts on an evaluation of what works, not just what’s politically palatable.

Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) claims that approach is the cornerstone of his [\\$9 trillion debt reduction plan](#) released last week. “A thorough review of the entire federal budget is long overdue,” Coburn wrote in the intro to his [620-page report](#). “Such an evaluation should not be seen through political or ideological lenses, but as a practical evaluation: What works and what does not? What is a priority and what is not? What is in the national interest and is a special interest? What is necessary today and what has become obsolete? And what is efficient and what is wasteful?”

Coburn’s language echoes a recommendation from the President’s Bipartisan Fiscal Commission, which in December [called on Congress](#) to “critically review all funded programs and make tough decisions to set priorities and reform or eliminate a number of them.”

President Barack Obama himself called for a similar review as a presidential candidate, [saying](#) he would “go through the entire federal budget, page by page, line by line,” and “eliminate the programs that don’t work and aren’t needed.”

The message is clear and there seems to be broad agreement: We need an evidence-based system to guide future budget decisions that assesses the relative performance and impact of all government programs. What would such a review look like?

The Center for American Progress recommended one possible solution in “[The Secret to Programs that Work](#).” That report lays out the “[Reviewing What Works](#)” process, which is a series of tools to evaluate program effectiveness.

The key to the Reviewing What Works approach is an interagency assessment that takes specific, concrete steps to compare the effectiveness of various programs. With input from dozens of federal and state government officials, and from outside performance experts, we compiled a set of key performance indicators that informed six basic questions that should be asked of every existing program:

- What goals across the government is the program contributing to?
- What impact does the program have on those goals?

- Does the program work well with other programs to maximize collective impact and minimize duplication?
- How cost effective is the program compared to others?
- Is the program well run? Have there been delays or cost overruns at the program?
- Does the program learn from experience and improve in response?

Coming up with the questions was the easy part. Developing an interagency review process that's both rigorous and reliable—and is seen as objective and nonpartisan—is the real challenge. A detailed examination of how the process would actually work is presented in the recent column, [“‘What Works’ Budgeting.”](#)

To be sure, even the most meticulous evaluation will never replace political consideration of budget cuts. But the information in our Reviewing What Works tools will provide a counterbalance to political posturing and interest group pleading, ensuring critical questions of program performance make their way into the debate.

Both sides of the congressional aisle should welcome a bipartisan call for a comprehensive, results-oriented review of the federal budget. But a responsible review requires more than one senator, or even one agency. Unless Congress and the administration step up and commit at the highest levels, vital public services will continue to unnecessarily end up on the chopping block—and ineffective programs will survive.

*John Griffith is a Research Associate and Jitinder Kohli is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress.*