

Common Sense Reforms for the 112th Congress



*As the dawn of the 112th Congress draws near, there are several reforms Congress should enact, regardless of which party is in control. These reforms will help reinvigorate public trust and confidence in Congress, two things that are clearly lacking. In addition, **these reforms just make sense.***

- 1. Pass Budget Bills Before the Beginning of the Fiscal Year**—For the first time in recent memory, [none of the twelve](#) spending bills were enacted prior to Congress leaving town for the election, meaning a post-election “lame duck” Congress will still be working on government funding even as the first quarter of the fiscal year winds down.
- 2. Make Congress More Transparent**—Committees should post all information about votes, attendance and amendments, and this should be done in real time. Furthermore, all non-classified [Congressional Research Service \(CRS\)](#) reports should be made [available to the public](#). Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports should be released immediately—not subject to a [30-day member hold](#)—and all non-classified executive branch reports to Congressional Committees should be posted on the Committee web sites.
- 3. End Accounting Gimmicks**—Creating budgets based on [“temporary” tax cuts](#), short term patches to the AMT, and routinely ignored formulas, like Medicare reimbursement rates, might soften the sticker shock of Congress’ budget bills, but creative accounting isn’t beneficial to taxpayers. Congress needs to build their budget around the costs we know we will incur, and either raise revenue or cut spending to get our fiscal house in order.
- 4. Earmark Reforms**—Establish spending decision-making systems that enable Congress and the Administration to make funding decisions on the basis of competition, merit or formulas. As we transition to this system, [Congress should adopt rules](#) that prevent earmarks for campaign contributors, make earmarks more transparent with a real-time [online database](#) that is downloadable, searchable, and sortable, and enable independent auditing of earmarks by the GAO.
- 5. Reassess Authorizations**—Congress is all too happy [to authorize new projects](#) and programs for agencies that already have thousands of projects worth billions of dollars waiting to be completed. Adding to the [years-long backlog](#) of projects simply saps money from good projects and increases the likelihood of bad projects limping along. Be it bridges, or dams, or new weapons systems, Congress must reevaluate authorized yet incomplete projects and ensure new authorization bills prioritize the needs of taxpayers over politicians.
- 6. All Bills Available to the Public 72 Hours Before Votes**—[Current rules](#) provide for a waiting period between the unveiling of a bill’s text and a vote, but these rules are regularly evaded by whichever party is in control. Congress should require a supermajority—2/3 of all seated members—to waive the rule.

7. **Expand the Office of Congressional Ethics to Cover the Senate**—[The Office of Congressional Ethics \(OCE\)](#), an independent body created in 2008 by the House of Representatives, has [proven itself a positive force](#) in helping police ethics. Unfortunately, it's only authorized to cover the House. The Senate should immediately follow the House's lead and create a fully independent office complete with subpoena power and adequate resources to help ensure Senators stay focused on making government work.
8. **Pay As You Go (PAYGO) Enforcement**—While PAYGO has had some impact on the margins, [too much spending is exempted](#). New discretionary spending agreed to in the budget and entitlement spending can increase annually without any impact. Huge programs such as Alternative Minimum Tax relief, increased Medicare payments to doctors, and other measures have enjoyed waivers or outright loopholes. If we are to close the deficit, we need PAYGO to have real teeth.
9. **End the Automatic Pay Raise**—Congress [has the system wired](#) so that unless they vote to stop it, they will receive an annual bump in salary. This should be immediately reversed so that Congress has to have a recorded vote to increase their pay.
10. **Disclose all Information on Official Congressional Travel**—Every year lawmakers go on dozens of trips around the world on the [taxpayers' dime](#). It is important that Congress occasionally travel, meet officials from other countries, and better understand America's role in the world. However, the [public should be able to see](#) information about cost, lodging, the lawmakers' spouses and staff who attended and trip itineraries. This should be available online shortly after the conclusion of the trip (for security purposes).

These ten procedural reforms are not a panacea. But they will put the new Congress on a more solid footing of trust with the American taxpayer. These reforms will make Congress work better.

Taxpayers for Common Sense is a 501(c) (3) national non-partisan budget watchdog serving as an independent voice for American taxpayers. For more information visit www.taxpayer.net, or contact us at 202-546-8500 or info@taxpayer.net.

Revised October 2010