Deficit Dynamics: A Closer Look at the 12 Legislators Charged with Reducing the Deficit

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Though Congress remains on August Recess, scheduled to return to Washington after Labor Day, the powerful new Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction—or “Super Committee”—has started to take both a physical and ideological shape.

The Super Committee was created as part of a bipartisan agreement to raise the debt ceiling before Congress adjourned for the summer. The Budget Control Act of 2011, which Congress passed and the president signed into law, creates a temporary 12-member committee charged with proposing at least $1.5 trillion in cuts before Thanksgiving, a tall order and short timeframe by any legislative standard. If Congress fails to pass the committee’s recommended cuts, additional mechanisms are triggered to make automatic budget cuts, making the Super Committee the most powerful political entity since the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. Read further CSG analysis of the debt showdown here [2] and here [3].

Who’s In:

The Super Committee membership is bipartisan and bicameral, six Democrats and six Republicans, six of which are senators, the other six are members of the House. All the members of the committee have been appointed, but a closer look at who they are and how they work together may yield a preview of what will be cut at the end of November—besides turkey.

The committee’s co-chairs are U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (D) of Washington and U.S. Rep. Jeb Hensarling (R) of Texas. Both are political heavyweights in their respective caucuses. Murray is the fourth highest-ranking member of the Senate and chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which is a major fundraising arm of the Democratic Party focused on electing Democrats to the Senate. A former Washington state senator, Murray also chairs the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, and is considered a member of Majority Leader Harry Reid’s inner circle. Hensarling serves as chair of the House Republican Conference, the fourth highest-ranking Republican in the House. He is a former member of the influential Republican Study Committee and a close political ally of House Speaker John Boehner.

The remaining 10 members of the Super Committee have political allegiances that mirror the co-chairs, all are steadfast loyalists to party leadership in the House and Senate, and most have experience with the federal budget. Other than Hensarling, Speaker John Boehner appointed Rep. Fred Upton and Rep. Dave Camp, the chairs of the Committee on Energy and Commerce and Committee on Ways and Means, respectively, two of the most powerful committees in the House. Similarly, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi appointed three of her closest allies in the House, a
strategy that Reid also employed. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s picks are distinctive as they are three of the most junior members Congress on the committee; however, one of his appointees is Sen. John Kyl, the second-ranking Republican in the Senate.

Who's Out:

What is most interesting about the makeup of the Super Committee is who is not a member. Namely, it includes no members of the Tea Party Caucus. This is interesting especially for Boehner, whose majority in the House is largely due to the election of Tea Partiers en masse last year. However, Boehner’s standing with these new members remains in question, and the appointment of largely “old guard” members may be the speaker’s way of sending a message that he has preserved a united House caucus.

For the Democrats’ part, no members of the Blue Dog Coalition are on the Super Committee. This group of fiscally conservative Democrats in the House took the biggest hit in the 2010 election, with a membership cut in half due to the Tea Party wave. They were also a major problem for Pelosi during the protracted debate over health care reform. Many Democrats believe the drawnout debate over health insurance reform led to disenchantment of Democratic voters last fall.

What Does the Committee Makeup Mean for the States:

Seven out of 10 committee members have significant state government experience, including all six Democrats and one Republican. However, when it comes to Congress, state experience on a resume doesn’t always translate into state sensitivity in budget cuts.

Though the Budget Control Act calls for a “bipartisan” committee, the actual appointees are mostly party stalwarts on each side of the aisle. There are a few wildcards though, such as Sen. Max Baucus, an established consensus-builder in the Senate who does not always tote the party line.

While Baucus has earned a reputation as a power broker capable of working both sides of the aisle, some of his deal-making has come at the expense of state budgets. In the runup to the stimulus vote in 2009, he was instrumental in brokering the compromise that secured the three Republican votes needed to pass the bill by reducing funding for the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund by $25 billion. He has more recently been quoted during the debt ceiling debate advocating for a Medicaid “blended rate” that would shift significant costs to states.

Another indicator of how the committee will function will be how it is staffed. Standing committees in the House and Senate have partisan staffs, but on Monday, the Super Committee co-chairs announced they are planning on hiring a bipartisan staff. This is an early indication that, at the outset at least, the Super Committee members are trying to work together to achieve their mandate and craft a sustainable long-term debt plan, regardless of what their backgrounds may be. What programs will get cut, preserved or forgotten, though, remains to be seen. Given the scale and scope of federal transfers to the states, however, no compromise will hold state budgets harmless.

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