Making Budget Sausage
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As the old adage has it, there are two processes that one should never observe closely--the making of sausage and the making of laws. Pennsylvanians have recently had a chance to test the adage as they have anxiously watched the state legislature make some budget sausage. On the whole, it hasn't improved the electorate’s appetite either for sausage or for politics.

It’s true that ultimately the system worked. The State does have a budget. Getting it; however, was no picnic. The ordeal brought pain and frustration to many while the result perfectly pleased no one. Moreover, the process itself is reflexively secretive, innately elitist, and of mind-boggling complexity.

But what voters hate most of all is the conflict, the self-interested posturing, and the seemingly incessant wrangling that goes on in the budget making. Why, many ask, do we have these irksome political struggles? Why can’t our politicians work together and eschew the partisanship that many find so vile?

It’s a good question--albeit one that offers no simple answers. Part of the explanation for budget brawls is the real and substantial policy disagreements that exist between Democrats and Republicans in the State. It’s not just small-minded party squabbling. The differences are genuine.

These differences were abundantly illustrated in this year’s budget battle when state Democrats were considerably more supportive of Rendell’s expansionist programs, not only because they are supporting a Democratic governor, but also because they echoed their constituents policy views--views that are popular in the urban communities and with the liberal constituencies these legislators represent.

On the other hand, Republican legislators, many elected from conservative or rural districts of the State, are ideologically opposed to more expansive government and increased spending. In the budget battle, they opposed most new programs as well as tax and fee increases.

But more than ideology drives budget conflict. Institutional rivalries between the legislative and executive branches also exist. In our intricate governmental system of separation of powers and checks and balances, the governor and the legislature often get inconsistent "marching orders" from the electorate.

Last year’s elections provide a useful example. The voters overwhelmingly re-elected a governor with an outsized second term agenda while at the same time staging a savage revolt against the legislature that swept 55 new members into the General Assembly, many elected on a no pay hike, no tax hike platform.

The result was that an all but schizophrenic Harrisburg officialdom entered this year’s budget cycle with sharply different agendas. The reelected Governor promptly handed the legislature an ambitious expansionary agenda, one popular with the voters, but requiring fees and taxes.

At the same time, a new legislature--seemingly operating in a parallel political universe--entered the budget cycle filled with new members committed to obstructing governmental expansion and defeating proposals for
new taxes. In short, the Governor and the legislature were committed to a collision course, each basing its course on an electoral mandate from the voters.

Finally, divided government—the legislature and the Governor’s Office under control of different parties—also should be identified as a source of the conflicts that surface during budget battles. Divided government has existed in Pennsylvania since Rendell’s first year in office. And each of those years, now five in number, have produced late budgets. By contrast, during the Ridge-Schweiker gubernatorial years, when the government was controlled by one party, the budget was passed routinely on time.

All of this helps in understanding the almost perennial budget impasse in Pennsylvania. There are bona fide ideological, political, and institutional differences that divide Pennsylvanians—differences that produce sharp cleavages across key demographic and geographic voter groups. Harrisburg politicians reflect these conflicts as much as they create them.

But budget battles are more than a necessary evil. They also provide the indispensable political mechanism that forges consensus from discord. Without a way to resolve conflict, we would have no consensus on the values that unite us. Without that consensus, there would be no budget; and without a budget there could be no state government—nor programs for state government to run.

Vexing as it may be, the process of confronting and resolving budget conflict plays a vital role in the form of government Americans’ have. Like the manufacture of sausage, many of us might not like how it’s done, but so far no one has come up with a better way to do it.

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