

STATE EXPERIENCES WITH ANNUAL AND BIENNIAL BUDGETING:

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INTRODUCTION

The trend among state governments for the past 70 years has been to abandon biennial budgeting for annual budgeting. Forty-four states enacted biennial budgets in 1940. Only 19 do now.

One reason for the change was the resurgence of state legislative power in the middle of the 20th century. Legislatures' growing role in state government can be measured by the shift from biennial to annual legislative sessions. In 1940 only four state legislatures held annual sessions—and Alabama's legislature met only once every four years. In 2011, only four states still have biennial sessions—Montana, Nevada, North Dakota and Texas. Two changes came recently: Arkansas with its first annual session in 2009, and Oregon with its first in 2011.

A shift to annual budgeting followed the move to annual sessions, as state budgets grew larger and more complicated and as federal grant-in-aid programs to state and local governments became increasingly prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. The move to annual budgeting also coincided with the greater volatility in state revenues that resulted from increasing reliance on sales and personal income taxes. Although such historic changes have not moved all states to annual budgeting, the trend has been clear. One surprising complaint about biennial budgets is that they are time-consuming. An editorial writer in Maine opined in 2010 that:

The state's two-year budget format is an incredible time-waster. Executive departments spend endless hours charting spending over two years (really almost three, from the start of planning), and rarely find numbers that stick. The Legislature spends many more hours trying to make the document work, and instead ends up crafting multiple supplemental budgets to fix the first one.

Two-year budgets are a historical accident—at one time the Legislature didn't meet every year. And no other entity the state deals with—federal, county, municipal or business—uses the biennial format. Scrap it, except for capital investment.¹

In Oregon, plans for the state's first annual session in 2011 included a plan to revise its biennial budget during the Legislative Assembly's second annual session in 2012. The budget chairs wrote:

We are using the tool of the February session in 2012 that the voters have provided for us by setting out what comes down to a hybrid—a two-year budget with a plan for significant revision, if required, in year two. By holding back \$310 million in a supplemental ending balance from the second year funding levels, we maintain the flexibility needed to address

another financial downturn should it occur between June 30 of this year and the start of the February 2012 session. If revenue is stable or up, the supplemental ending balance can be returned to the funding levels for year two of the budget, with flexibility to adjust if needed to address specific needs. If revenue is down, the supplemental ending balance will serve as a financial reserve to provide stability to the state's programs and services.²

The Oregon leaders' concern for the accuracy of their state's revenue forecasts is not unusual. Speaker Robbie Wills of Arkansas attributed his state's change to annual budgeting in 2009 partly to the difficulties of forecasting revenues as far in advance as biennial budgeting requires. Speaker Wills noted the special problems term-limited legislators encountered with biennial legislative sessions and budgets: inadequate opportunity to familiarize themselves with the budget and the process.³

Changes have not all been in one direction, however. A few states have moved from annual to biennial budgeting over the past 20 years or have changed back and forth, because of partisan politics, uncertainty as to which worked better, or both. Connecticut returned to biennial budgeting in 1991, reversing the decision lawmakers made to adopt annual budgeting when the state began annual legislative sessions in 1971. Arizona made a gradual transition from annual to biennial budgeting in the 1990s, and completed the process with the enactment of a biennial budget in 1999. Then, in 2002, it shifted to a bifurcated system under which larger agencies receive annual budgets while biennial budgeting continues for smaller agencies. Kansas uses a similar system. All changes are listed in Appendix 1.

Biennial budgeting states generally enact separate budgets for two fiscal years at once. True biennial budgeting—enacting a single two-year budget—is rare, although still practiced in North Dakota and Wyoming (table 1). North Dakota has biennial sessions as well. Although the Wyoming legislature meets annually, in the ~~budget~~ budget year its session is scheduled for only 20 days. Oregon also has enacted a consolidated biennial budget in the recent past, but the co-chairs' proposal for the 2011-2013 biennium breaks out proposed appropriations for the two fiscal years separately.⁴

Table 1 classifies states according to their budget schedules. It includes Arizona and Kansas as annual budget states based on the preponderance of their budget.

TABLE 1. ANNUAL AND BIENNIAL BUDGETING STATES
 (Boldface indicates the 10 most populous states in 2010.)

ANNUAL SESSION ANNUAL BUDGET (31 states)	ANNUAL SESSION BIENNIAL BUDGET (15 states)	BIENNIAL SESSION BIENNIAL BUDGET (4 states)
Arizona+ Alabama Alaska Arkansas California Colorado Delaware Florida Georgia Idaho Illinois Iowa Kansas+ Louisiana Maryland Massachusetts Michigan Mississippi Missouri New Jersey New Mexico New York Oklahoma Pennsylvania Rhode Island South Carolina South Dakota Tennessee Utah Vermont West Virginia	Connecticut Hawaii Indiana Kentucky Maine Minnesota Nebraska New Hampshire North Carolina Ohio Oregon Virginia Washington Wisconsin Wyoming*	Montana Nevada North Dakota* Texas

*Biennial budget states that enact a consolidated two-year budget. Other biennial budget states enact two annual budgets at one time.

+Annual budget states where smaller agencies receive biennial budgets.

As Table 1 indicates, biennial budgets are more likely to be found in the less populous states, as are biennial legislatures. Among the 10 largest states—whether measured by population or by legislative appropriations—only Ohio and Texas use biennial budgets, and only Texas has regular biennial sessions of the legislature.

These are the other questions this report examines:

1. Are there significant differences in budget practices between states with annual and biennial budgets?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a biennial budget?
3. Does a biennial budget improve planning and make budgets more predictable?
4. Do biennial budgets require revisions more frequently than annual budgets?
5. Do biennial budget states spend more money than annual budget states?

1. Are there significant differences in budget practices between states with annual and biennial budgets?

State budgeting practices vary widely for reasons of politics and history, making it difficult to identify one reason for the differences. Biennial and annual budgets, however, do not appear to be the cause of significant differences in budgeting practices.

There does not appear to be any consistent relationship between state budget and legislative cycles and governors' powers to cut budgets or transfer funds among agencies or programs. A governor's power to reduce budgets or make transfers varies greatly from state to state, but it does not appear to be related to the kind of budgets or legislative sessions in the state.

Governors in some states with annual legislatures and budgets have remarkably broad administrative authority over the budget. Governors in Iowa, Indiana, South Carolina and South Dakota have unlimited power to transfer funds among state agencies. Governors in 10 of the states with annual legislative sessions may reduce budgets by unlimited amounts to cope with revenue shortfalls. Governors in only five of the 19 states with biennial budgets have as much power to reduce spending. Thus the budget cycle in itself does not appear to create nor prevent a need for strong executive budget review authority.⁵

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a biennial budget cycle?

There is little evidence of clear advantages of either an annual or biennial state budget. In 1972, the Council of State Governments (CSG) examined a number of states that had recently adopted annual budgets for the first time. No clear findings emerged, and the study concluded that:

In reality, a State can develop a good system of executive and legislative fiscal and program planning and controls under either an annual or biennial budget. The system would work differently with the alternative time spans, but could be effective under either approach.⁶

Analysts at Texas A&M University reviewed the CSG study in the course of their own examination of annual and biennial budgeting in 1984, and came to the same conclusions:

The arguments used to justify and refute both annual and biennial budgets remain essentially unchanged [since 1972]—and unproven. The success of a budget cycle seems to depend on the commitment of state officials to good implementation rather than on the method itself.⁷

Proponents of biennial budgeting cite the major advantages to be cost and time savings. They argue that biennial budgeting is more conducive to long-term planning and allows more time for program review and evaluation than annual budgeting.

Biennial budgeting may reduce executive branch costs (in terms of staff time and salaries) of preparing budgets, since the process is more consolidated than annual budgeting. State experience appears to bear this out, according to the studies cited above. Annual budgets create greater pressures on all budget staff and policymakers than biennial budgets, since closing the previous year's budget, administering the new year's budget and beginning to plan the following year's budget occur almost simultaneously.

In terms of the time a legislature spends on budgeting, nonetheless, the evidence is inconclusive. As reported earlier, biennial budget states tend to return to their budgets in the second year of a biennial session, and not necessarily because of difficult budget conditions. The Washington State Office of Financial Management has observed that "Since the inception of annual legislative sessions in 1979, it has become common for the Legislature to enact annual revisions to the state's biennial budget."⁸ The experience of Connecticut, discussed below, suggests it is difficult for legislators to refrain from acting as though they had an annual budget even after they have made a formal change to a biennial budget.

In 2000, NCSL asked legislative fiscal staff in the 13 biennial budget states with annual sessions "Does the legislature spend a smaller proportion of its time on budget issues in the non-budget session than the budget session?" Eleven states responded. Five said that the legislature spent proportionately less time on the budget and five that it spent about the same amount of time. North Carolina staff reported that the legislature spent proportionately more time on the budget in its short session, due to the brevity of the session—three months—and the restrictions on carry-over and new bills.

Respondents noted, however, that the proportion of time spent on the budget in the non-budget sessions varied greatly from year to year. A budget deficit, a substantial revenue surplus or policy issues with significant fiscal implications can cause a legislature to devote a large amount of time to budget issues. The Ohio respondent said, for example, that in a "normal" session, the legislature spends two weeks on budget amendments and corrections in the non-budget year. In the preceding two bienniums, however, fiscal issues surrounding education finance, tobacco settlement revenues and electric utility deregulation had occupied the entire non-budget sessions.

Long-term planning. Evidence from states that have changed from annual to biennial budgeting over the past 40 years fails to show that biennial budgeting is particularly productive for long-term planning. The CSG study in 1972 produced such conflicting evidence that it could neither confirm nor reject the idea. The Texas A&M study of 1984 was also inconclusive on the point, as was the study done by the U.S. General Accounting Office in 1987.⁹ Analysts in Connecticut, however,

emphasized that the governor and legislature greatly improved their long-term budget forecasting and analysis after the state adopted a biennial budget in 1991.

Program Review and Evaluation. A strong argument for biennial budgeting is that it can provide time for administrators and legislators to focus on the results of their decisions and not just the process of budgeting. This was one of the principal arguments that led Connecticut to return to biennial budgeting in 1991. Proponents contended that, "The present system (of annual budgeting) does not allow enough time to review expenditures in depth. Those preparing the budget finish one year and then immediately plunge into the next year's budget."¹⁰ The biennial cycle was intended to focus on making major programmatic and budget decisions in the first year, and to devote the second year to in-depth evaluation of agency programs.

A Connecticut legislative committee that reviewed the biennial budget process in 2003 reported it had not met expectations. "Beginning with the first biennium," the committee observed, "the governor and legislature have proposed new and expanded programs along with significant policy changes in each year of the cycle. As a result, second-year adjustments and revisions are often extensive. There is also no evidence legislators or state agencies give greater attention to program outcomes and performance measures in the second year of the cycle." It recommended, nonetheless, that biennial budgeting be retained to bring a perspective of more than one year to the process and to allow for greater performance evaluation.¹¹

In 2000, NCSL asked legislative fiscal analysts in biennial budget states, "Does the legislature increase its oversight or evaluation of agencies in the non-budget year?" Staff in two states reported that the legislature did increase its oversight activities in the non-budget year. Staff in nine states, however, reported that was not the case. Although intuitively it seems likely that biennial budgeting encourages legislative performance evaluation, the evidence is very weak.

3. Does a biennial budget improve planning and make budgets more predictable?

Planning a biennial budget requires a 30-month revenue forecast, compared with 18 months for an annual budget. As Speaker Wills of Arkansas commented, the difference is significant. A 2011 analysis of the accuracy of state revenue estimates from 1987 through 2009 indicates that the average error of estimate for biennial states was 2.18 percent, more than twice the 1.04 percent average for annual budgeting states. The volatility of state revenue sources was the prime cause of miscalculations.¹² Such averages do not mean that revenue forecasts in biennial states are always less accurate than those in annual budget states. Some biennial states have a more accurate forecasting record than some annual states. Overall, though, the statistics suggest the greater difficulty of forecasting revenues accurately in biennial budget states.

Biennial budgeting requires a longer commitment of policy direction and funding than does annual budgeting. It also means that agency personnel may have to spend less time in budget planning and presentations than under a system of annual budgeting. Does this mean more predictability and certainty of planning for them and for legislative committees? The answer is generally yes, but the difference may in fact be small.

State governments tend to budget incrementally, beginning with the current level of expenditures and dividing up any additional resources in proportion to previous program budgets. Unless there is significant economic change, state budgets rarely impose dramatic changes in agency budgets. Sixty percent to 70 percent of most states' general fund appropriations goes to programs not susceptible to sweeping changes in funding or design: elementary, secondary and higher education; corrections; and Medicaid and other entitlement programs. Regardless of the budget cycle, continuity is built in to state budgets.

Even so, economic cycles can disrupt budgets. Seventy percent of state tax revenue comes from sales and income taxes, which are very sensitive to the health of the economy. The recessions of 2000 and 2007-2009 and the slow recovery from the last recession seriously distorted state budgets regardless of the length of their budget cycles. Budget cycles cannot insulate states from external factors such as the condition of the economy.

4. Do biennial budgets require revisions more frequently than annual budgets?

Revisions in enacted budgets, often called supplemental appropriations, declined after a state shifted from biennial to annual budgeting, according to the CSG and Texas A&M studies. But in recent years, supplemental appropriations have been necessary in many states, not just those with biennial budgets, because of fluctuating revenues and cost overruns in state programs.

During the past 20 years, many state budgets have been hit by revenue shortfalls and expenditure overruns. The former tended to occur in the three largest state tax sources—general sales taxes, personal income taxes, and corporate income taxes—in which a small error in the estimate can create a significant effect in dollars. Expenditure overruns have frequently occurred in Medicaid and other social service programs, as well as other programs.

Annual legislative sessions allow for timely responses to such issues and ensure that requests for supplemental appropriations will be reviewed in the context of the entire state budget, which is true regardless of the budget cycle. Legislatures with biennial sessions might have to be called into special session to revise the budget.

NCSL's statistics on the number of legislative special sessions, however, indicate that states with biennial legislative sessions have fewer special sessions than all states, on average. Of the six legislatures that have or until recently had biennial sessions—Arkansas, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon and Texas—only Texas had more special sessions than the national average from 1981 through 2010. Texas's special sessions have generally been for non-budgetary reasons, since the governor and Legislative Budget Board have extensive powers of revision over enacted budgets. There is no evidence that biennial budgets are particularly conducive to calls for special sessions.¹³

The extent to which budgets are actually revised during the second year of a biennium varies from state to state and from time to time, largely depending on economic and fiscal conditions. Connecticut's experiences revising and adjusting the budget to account for new programs have been about as time-consuming as enacting the full budget. Ohio's experience has been the opposite: Except for the regularly scheduled enactment of a capital budget in the off-year, the biennial budget usually receives a few adjustments that can be dealt with expeditiously.

5. Do biennial budget states spend more money than annual budget states?

The possibility that biennial budgeting results in smaller state budgets than annual budgeting was raised and rejected in NCSL's first study of annual and biennial budgeting.¹⁴ Since then, one researcher, Paula Kearns, found a statistical association between higher state per capita spending and annual budgeting. Kearns was careful to note that she found only a correlation and not a cause and effect relationship between the two. Also, her measure of state spending omitted state subsidies to local governments, for no stated reason. Since those subsidies constitute, on average, more than 30 percent of state spending, their inclusion could have changed the results. Kearns's research also did not correct for the fact that some states are responsible for a much greater share of total state and local government expenditures than other states. For those reasons, her findings do not settle the question whether one budget cycle or another affects the overall level of state spending.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

There is little evidence that either annual or biennial state budgets hold clear advantages over the other. The evidence is inconclusive on the question whether biennial budgeting is more conducive to long-term planning than annual budgeting, although some evidence indicates that biennial budgeting is more favorable to program review and evaluation. Biennial budgeting is likely to reduce budgeting costs somewhat for executive agencies, but it also is likely to reduce legislators' familiarity with budgets. States with biennial budgets and biennial legislative sessions do not appear to give greater authority over budget revision to governors than other states. Forecasting is likely to prove more accurate in annual budget states than in biennial budget states, possibly reducing the need for supplemental appropriations and special legislative sessions. This study has found no convincing evidence that the length of the budget cycle, in itself, determines how efficiently a state enacts a budget and whether it requires extensive change during the course of its administration.

APPENDIX 1. STATES THAT HAVE CHANGED THEIR BUDGET CYCLES SINCE 1968

FROM BIENNIAL TO ANNUAL APPROPRIATIONS

Alabama – 1975
Arkansas -- 2010
Florida -- 1971
Georgia – 1974
Idaho – 1972
Iowa -- 1983
Illinois – 1970
Kentucky -- 2001
Mississippi -- 1971
Missouri – 1972
Oklahoma -- 1968
Tennessee – 1970
Utah -- 1969
Vermont – 1978 .

FROM ANNUAL TO BIENNIAL APPROPRIATIONS

Arizona – 1999
Hawaii – 1968
Nebraska -- 1987

FROM BIENNIAL TO ANNUAL TO BIENNIAL

Connecticut – to annual in 1971, to biennial in 1991.
Indiana – to annual in 1975, to biennial in 1978
Nebraska – to annual in 1972, to biennial in 1987
North Carolina – to annual in 1973, to biennial in 1975

FROM BIENNIAL TO ANNUAL TO BIENNIAL TO ANNUAL

Iowa – to annual in 1975, to biennial in 1979, to annual in 1983

Sources: NCSL surveys of legislative fiscal officers, 1987, 1994; 2008; GAO, 1987.

NOTES:

- ¹ Douglas Rooks, "Fixing the State's Budget Process, Brunswick, Maine, *Times-Record*, Aug. 19, 2010.
- ² Oregon Legislative Assembly, Joint Committee on Ways and Means, *Oregon's 2011-13 Co-Chairs' Budget*, March 29, 2011; http://www.leg.state.or.us/comm/lfo/2011_13CoChairBudget.pdf.
- ³ Speaker Robbie Wills, Arkansas House of Representatives, interview with author, April 23, 2009.
- ⁴ *Oregon's 2011-13 Co-Chairs' Budget*.
- ⁵ See, for example, NCSL, "Executive Authority to Cut the Enacted Budget" (September 2008) at <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=12589>; NCSL, "Legislative Role in Cutting the Enacted Budget" (August 2008) at <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=12594>; and National Association of State Budget Officers, *Budget Processes in the States: 2008* (Washington, D.C.: NASBO, 2008); <http://www.nasbo.org/Publications/BudgetProcessintheStates/tabid/80/Default.aspx>.
- ⁶ Council of State Governments, *Annual or Biennial Budgets?* (Lexington, Ky.: CSG., 1972), 23.
- ⁷ Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, "Results of PAR Survey on Annual vs. Biennial State Budgeting" (Baton Rouge, La.: PARCL, 1982).
- ⁸ Office of Financial Management, *Washington State Budget Process* (Olympia, Wash.: Office of Financial Management, July 2009), 1.
- ⁹ Charles W. Wiggins and Keith E. Hamm, "Annual Versus Biennial Budgeting?" Public Policy Paper No. 7 (Austin, Texas: Public Policy Resources Laboratory, Texas A&M University, 1984), III-15; U.S. General Accounting Office, *Budget Issues: Current Status and Recent Trends of State Biennial and Annual Budgeting* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GAO, 1987).
- ¹⁰ [Connecticut] Commission to Study the Management of State Government, *Final Implementation Report* (Hartford, Conn.: CSCMG, 1991).
- ¹¹ Connecticut General Assembly, Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, *Connecticut Budget Process: Findings and Recommendations* (Hartford, Conn.: Conn. General Assembly, December 9, 2003).
- ¹² The median errors of estimate showed a similar but smaller difference: 2.06 percent for biennial states and 1.4 percent for annual budget states. These errors of estimate were calculated separately for the 20 states that had biennial budgets and the 30 that had annual budgets from 1987 to 2009. Arizona and Kansas were counted as annual budget states. The data on which the calculations are based appear in Pew Center on the States and Rockefeller Institute of Government, *States' Revenue Estimating: Cracks in the Crystal Ball* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Center on the States, March, 2011), 41, Appendix B.
- ¹³ Brenda Erickson, NCSL Legislative Management Program, provided the statistics summarized in this paragraph.
- ¹⁴ Barbara Yondorf, "Annual versus Biennial Budgeting: The Arguments, the Evidence: A Presentation to the Wisconsin Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Jan. 26, 1987," (Denver, Colo.: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1987).
- ¹⁵ Paula S. Kearns, "The Determinants of State Budget Periodicity: An Empirical Analysis," *Public Budgeting and Finance*, 13, no. 1 (March 1993): 40-58.