

The Quill

Conversations
& Commentary from
The LeMieux Center
for Public Policy

AT PALM BEACH ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY



Today I Am No Longer Just a Bill

By TOM ROONEY

Budget Reconciliation. Filibuster. COVID relief. We will be hearing a lot about these things on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., over the next several weeks.

But let's start from the beginning. Or at least where one would think the beginning would be. Usually it begins as most legislation does, as an idea. With COVID, the idea is not so complicated and not so novel. The government is looking to assist Americans who are hurting due to the pandemic. Businesses are waning or closed. Unemployment is high. Some schools are closed to in-person attendance. Congress has stepped in over the last year on more than one occasion to offer financial assistance. But now we have a new administration and an evenly

divided Congress (albeit leaning left) and another relief (or stimulus) package has gotten more dubious. Whether it be for political or fiscal reasons, this bill won't sail through Congress even though 68 percent of Americans want it.

Part of the controversy is the price tag: \$1.9 trillion. To put that into perspective, when I was first elected to Congress in 2008, the federal debt was \$4 trillion, in total. Now we are talking about roughly half that amount for one single, emergency relief bill. And now, our national debt is rapidly approaching \$28 trillion, and growing.

The other problem is that this relief isn't really one single bill. Too often now, one single bill (or idea) — that any grade school civics student would assume goes from committee to the House floor to the Senate and finally to the president's desk



CONTINUED FROM FRONT

– doesn't exist. When I was younger, there was an educational video by "Schoolhouse Rock" which talked about a "bill sitting on Capitol Hill," and how that bill became law. I honestly thought when I was sworn into Congress that's how it worked. I soon came to realize the truth is that a single idea, good or bad, rarely (if ever) went by itself from the House to the Senate to the White House the way we were taught.

Mostly, bills of any kind got absorbed into whatever train was leaving the station. In recent years, the only trains that make it to the final destination are considered "must

pass." That is, a spending bill to keep the government funded or a debt limit bill to raise how much we can spend. Those two trains are about it. And this is the case no matter which political party is in charge.

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When Hurricane Irma devastated Florida's orange crop in my district, I had to get emergency funding passed immediately. Easy enough, right? Wrong. It took a few months but I finally got the funding... by attaching my bill to a debt limit vote! Sure, from time to time some issue that makes someone look good will make it to the president for a signing photo op with a few legislators they can use in a campaign ad. But mostly your government operates only where it has to: to keep the

lights on. This is not healthy for our lawmaking process; it is governing on the brink.

So where does COVID relief come into play?

This isn't a debt

limit vote or a traditional spending bill. But it is an emergency spending bill. Easy enough. The problem is the slim majority the Democrats have in the House. This is complicated further by certain pending cabinet nominations coming from the

House ranks, which will only allow for a handful of Democratic defections. The defectors would be the Democrats in Republican-leaning seats. Then of course on the Senate side there is an even 50-50 split the Democrats control, thanks to the vice president being the tie-breaker. But Senate rules have required that legislation usually needs 60 votes to pass. This is because of the filibuster rule, which is a mechanism to protect the minority from majority domination. It's not a concept in the Constitution. It's more of a gentleman's agreement. Why would the majority agree to this? Because Senators are not so shortsighted to ignore they are only an election away from the minority. It's also why legislation moves so dreadfully slow in the Senate – if at all. While we complain in the House about this all the time, volumes have been written about the virtues of the more deliberative body (the Senate) moving with less haste than the more emotional House. Specifically, only really important and serious matters would pass and make it to the president's desk. But over time, the filibuster has been worn down. First, a few years back with lower

court and cabinet nominations needing only a simple majority for the sake of seating the government more quickly and avoiding prolonged vacancies. Then came Supreme Court nominees needing only 51 votes to pass. But there's also matters related to the budget which need only 51 Senate votes. Again, think “keep the lights on.”

In the 1970s, Congress passed a budget act which included the concept of “reconciliation,” which was an amendment designed to actually help trim spending. By simple majority vote in the Senate, a spending bill can be “reconciled” efficiently to a budget resolution that has already passed. As in all things in Washington over the years, it is now allowed to be used once per fiscal year to move legislation that has some relationship to spending. Any COVID relief is money going out the door, so it probably fits. The problem is that other elements, such as raising the minimum wage, of this train leaving the station may not fit. Other Democratic ideas like immigration reform or gun control probably don't fit in that box. But



Tune in: *The Quill Podcast* is streaming now!

Recently, Senator LeMieux and Dr. Robert Lloyd launched *The Quill Podcast* — the official podcast of The LeMieux Center for Public Policy at Palm Beach Atlantic University, in which Lloyd and LeMieux tackle conversations of consequence to the political, economic and social realms.

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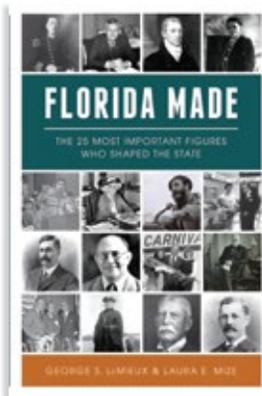
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Obamacare and the Trump tax cuts both passed by reconciliation so it all depends on how a bill is written.

So, in the end, there will be a relief bill. It may not be the \$1.9 trillion because some presents under this Christmas tree may not be deemed budgetary. It is not likely to be bipartisan, as the Democrats control the White House as well as the Senate and House of Representatives, although barely.

When listening to President Biden speak of unity in his inauguration, I would have hoped he'd have gotten more buy-in from some on the Republican side. But this is Washington today. It's all or nothing. And that's the problem. ✍️

Tom Rooney is a Senior Academic Fellow at the LeMieux Center for Public Policy and an adjunct professor of politics at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2009 to 2019, representing at different times Florida's 16th and 17th congressional districts.



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From the desk of Senator LeMieux



I am pleased to welcome you to the latest edition of *The Quill*! This publication highlights the LeMieux Center's mission to provide a space for reasoned, thoughtful and civil discourse on pressing public policy issues confronting Florida, the United States and the world. Every quarterly issue includes an article written by a scholar, policy maker, journalist or other thought leader with the knowledge, expertise and prudence to inform the reader on topics of broad public interest.

The American federal system of government—combined with a two party system—leads to a complex set of negotiations over legislation, policies, and processes. This is particularly true when control of Congress is so evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. The article in this issue of *The Quill*, written by a former member of Congress, assesses a newly-elected Congress grappling with issues related to the budget and political power. It provides an insider's view of how Congress works, and sometimes does not.

The Quill, and *The Quill Podcast*, are but one aspect of the Center's interests and activities. In addition, the Center's Distinguished Speaker Series hosts luminaries such as former Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, Associate Justice Clarence Thomas of

the United States Supreme Court and Dr. George Will, a well-known political commentator with *The Washington Post*. These speaking events, offered free of charge to the community, are held on the beautiful campus of Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Finally, the Freidheim Fellows program seeks to inculcate young people with the principles, perspectives and training to empower them to lead a new generation. Each year Palm Beach Atlantic students selected as Freidheim Fellows conduct research and present their findings on public policy questions. Their public presentations are certainly one of the highlights of the year for me.

The activities of the LeMieux Center would not be possible without the dedication and support of a number of individuals and organizations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the president of Palm Beach Atlantic for the University's strong support. It is a partnership that already has borne much fruit, and I firmly believe it will continue to make a difference in the life of this nation. Members of the LeMieux Center Board of Advisors deserve special commendation and thanks. Their energy, generosity, wisdom and leadership are an amazing testament to the commitment of these leaders to the broader public good.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. LeMieux'. The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

George S. LeMieux
U.S. Senator & Founder of
The LeMieux Center for Public Policy
www.lemieuxcenter.org



THE LEMIEUX CENTER
 FOR PUBLIC POLICY
at Palm Beach Atlantic University

Freidheim Fellows announced

The Center announced Madeline Coggins and Alexandra Pierce as the next Freidheim Fellows. The Fellows spend six months researching important topics related to public policy under the ongoing guidance of former U.S. Sen. George LeMieux and their faculty advisers. Pierce, a senior from Plainville, Connecticut, chose the topic *Election Law Reform: Ensuring the Integrity of the Election Process*. Coggins, a senior from DeLand, Florida, chose the topic *Advocating Better Funding for Vocational Training in Community Colleges*.

Read more at:
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