

PERFORMANCE- BASED BUDGETING



Gerald J. Miller
W. Bartley Hildreth
Jack Rabin

AN **ASPA** CLASSICS VOLUME

Performance-Based Budgeting

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Performance-Based Budgeting

An ASPA Classic

Gerald J. Miller

W. Bartley Hildreth

Jack Rabin

*Rutgers University, Wichita State University,
Pennsylvania State University*



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EDITOR BIOGRAPHIES

Gerald J. Miller is Associate Professor of Public Administration, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Campus at Newark. The author of forty-five research articles and eighteen books, his work includes *Government Financial Management Theory*. His research and teaching cover the area of resource allocation and control, especially government budgeting and financial management.

* * *

W. Bartley Hildreth, Regents Distinguished Professor of Public Finance in the Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs and the W. Frank Barton School of Business at Wichita State University, is a prolific author, former city finance director, and member of the National Advisory Council of State and Local Budgeting.

* * *

Jack Rabin is Professor of Public Administration and Public Policy at the Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg. He is the author/editor of nearly thirty books and editor of eight peer-reviewed journals. Rabin also is Executive Editor of the Marcel Dekker Public Administration and Public Policy book Series, the largest book series in the field.



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INTRODUCTION

From budgeting's inception, public budgeteers have tried to connect funding decisions with accountability. Cleveland's idea of the budget-making process (1915) as a responsible executive openly questioned by representatives became the essence of Willoughby's view of the larger purpose of a budget (1918), namely, to conduct government in conformity with the will of the people. Burkhead (1961, 14) developed the idea of accountability:

The budget was conceived as a major weapon for instilling responsibility in the governmental structure: the budget system rests on popular control; the budget will publicize what government is doing and make for an informed and alert citizenry; the budget will destroy the rule of invisible government.

Budgeteers also profess an obligation to broader goals: "to serve the public by upholding justice, ensuring law and order, providing a common defense, protecting the helpless, preserving the environment, and advancing the health and welfare of the public" (Caiden, 1998, 36). The question that follows for all of us in budgeting emerges immediately: How well has budgeting met professional standards of accountability, and how well has it achieved its broader obligations? With the reaction to the growth of government in an environment of mixed levels of economic growth, broad and fundamental changes brought about by globalization, and the evolving bases by which we judge a good and moral society, a crisis has developed in which views of government's role as necessary and important have come into doubt. Many reforms have been designed to reinstate the belief among taxpayers, citizens, and clients that governments perform well and spend money wisely.

Current reform efforts have striven to strengthen government accountability by tightening the link between budget decisions and government performance. The belief in tightening the link, widely held, rests on the idea that the public, recognizing and understanding the performance-funding linkage and the success professionals in the public sector have in achieving results, will see the public sector, and public managers, as a productive, necessary, and important part of society.

The current spate of reforms, which we call performance-based reforms, hail from some obvious places. Critics constantly beset governments with the complaint, Why can't you operate like a business? Many have rebutted the notion behind the question: by the very nature of their work, government managers aim for efficiency as only one goal among several. The fact remains that taxpayers, even politicians and managers, need a bottom line to tell them quickly whether their decisions are probably right or probably wrong and whether they are succeeding in their efforts to do their jobs well.

The Traditional Concentration on Communicating How Well We're Doing

Much of the taxpayer revolt and one major response to it, the "reinventing government" movement, stems from the public servants' extreme discomfort when they think traditionally and find that they do not know how to communicate how well or how poorly their work serves the public.

The history of efforts to bottom-line government operations goes back at least a century. Almost every decade has seen the introduction of federal efforts, usually as a commission of business people and academic experts, and now and then as a presidential initiative that plays well in the political arena, along with hundreds of state commissions and gubernatorial and legislative initiatives and thousands of local government efforts of the same kind. These various commissions and initiatives have all pointed out ways to strengthen budgeting while differing in what the budget focus should be.

Initially budgets focused on inputs or dollars, positions and salaries, materials, and supplies. This approach employed before-the-fact controls, a short-term horizon, and an emphasis on cutting waste and economizing. Later attention focused on outputs, or the tasks actually completed—immediately observable products and services related to the work done. Outputs data were supplemented by information on the desired quality, cost, and timeliness. The work was measured in terms of productivity, as the input-output ratio. The output emphasis lay on the process of work, as it proceeded, and forced managers to commit themselves to account for efficiency.

Later still, the focus broadened to outcomes. With the establishment of program budgeting, attention moved to goals actually met. That attention has homed in on two issues—measurability, or knowing that one has either achieved the goal or not, and validity, or knowing what difference achieving the goal itself would make. Cost-effectiveness and program effectiveness dominated the methods of judgment. Managers learned management techniques to achieve these outcomes, often without shedding their prior

emphases and their efforts to economize (strong input controls) and to be efficient (strong work process controls).

What reforms all seem to do is to widen the scope for budgeting. The focus on inputs led to efforts to control budget increases and to control spending while executing the budget through structures, procedures, and people concerned with fraud, waste, and abuse. Output-focused budgets widened attention to management improvement or to the productivity and efficiency of programs. Finally, outcomes budgeting connected the process with policy formulation, strategic planning, program goal formulation, and program evaluation.

The Present Concern for Citizen Participation and Democratic Governance of Budgeting

One definition of the current problem—"We just do not know how to communicate how well we're doing at what we think the citizens want"—reflects an insider view. As many have observed, the citizen often is very far away from the issue of concern, the manager and elected official somewhere between citizen and issue (King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998). As tax revolts and citizen complaints have mounted, the issues that most citizens, managers, and officials are alarmed about have surfaced in the budget. The budget directly or indirectly reflects every issue, with a power to force action in the direction citizens desire. Citizens, having penetrated the budgeting process—a not inconsiderable task—have established their rightful place there.

The present performance-based reforms have focused attention more than ever on sharing information and decision making in budgeting. Sharing information about what governments do well, through performance measurement and reporting, can go a long way in reducing cynicism (Berman, 1997). Broader participation in trading off various goals and means to achieve them, as well as in developing performance measures, will yield better decisions and a sharing of risks among citizens, public managers, and elected officials.

Expansion to deal with inputs, outputs, and outcomes with citizen participation in understanding and framing issues characterizes budgeting at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Recommendations have come from the National Advisory Council on State and Local Budgeting, a group of state and local practitioners, elected officials, and academics backed by the Government Finance Officers Association and other local and state government budgeting and management professional organizations. More prominently, President Clinton and Vice President Gore implemented the National Performance Review, and Congress passed the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993.

What Is a Budget?

The current reform efforts reflect similar concerns in the private sector. A private-sector model of budgeting takes a definite input-output-outcome form (Lazere, 1998; Churchill, 1984; Hax and Majluf, 1984; Knight, 1981; Trapani, 1982). First, forecasts of the economy, regulations governing business, and markets—customers and competitors—establish some horizon of opportunities and threats. Strategic goal setting follows with analysis of organization strengths and weaknesses. The result is the formulation of specific goals, including what market share the business and its business units can achieve over five or so years and what new business units might be created with what new products or services. The goals translate into annual or tactical performance plans—essentially what and who should do what this year. Plans include targets so that one knows whether one is making progress in achieving strategic business unit goals. The business unit also establishes measurable outputs and outcomes, called substantive and financial scorecards, weighting them in such a way that they balance emphasis and focus attention as intended. Budgets, in lump sum and having few process controls, follow plans and give considerable discretion to lower-level managers. Budgets also count in accrual terms, in that future spending is discounted to the present. Finally, individual employee performance plans follow from annual plans. Just as important, these individual plans and their measurable objectives tie into each individual's compensation. Needless to say, finance underlies and integrally relates all of these components: What does it cost and how much will that cost lever in earnings? The private-sector budget model differs from the public-sector model we have known. There is accrual of spending and a multiyear period that budgets must span; previously hidden future spending is recorded in the present. Present decisions must accord with long-term goals. Structures are decentralized and budgets lump sums, especially where performance measures are adequate, policies farsighted, and managers adept.

In comparison, what have reformers proposed as criteria for a good, modern, government budget? According to the National Advisory Council on State and Local Budgeting (1997), a budget should clearly define policy direction; translate taxes and revenues received into concrete levels of service; show consequences of increases or decreases in service and communicate this to stakeholders; facilitate control over expenditures; motivate and give feedback to employees; and evaluate employee and organization performance and make adjustments.

A similar picture develops in the operation of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (Radin, 1998), and likewise in state and local results acts and executive orders (Melkers and Willoughby, 1998). Im-

plementation of the federal act began only recently but emphasizes program results and holding federal government agencies accountable for them. The act focuses managers' attention on setting goals, measuring program performance against those goals, and reporting publicly on progress made. Obviously one of the foremost purposes of the act is to instill confidence in the public about federal government managers' ability to solve problems and meet citizen-taxpayers' needs.

To implement the federal Results Act, each agency must first develop strategic plans covering a period of at least five years. The strategic plan must include a mission statement, outcome-related measurable goals and objectives, and plans that agency managers and professionals intend to follow to achieve these goals through their activities and through their human, capital, information, and other resources. Those in the agency must consult Congress and others interested in or affected by the plans; in other words, they must consult stakeholders. As with the private-sector budget model, agency managers and professionals must develop annual performance plans that include performance indicators that will cover relevant outputs, service levels, and outcomes. With these performance plans, "Congress intended . . . to establish a direct annual link between plans and budgets" (GAO, 1999, 3) and to capture the long-range implication of choices and decisions with new methods of recognizing and measuring transactions in the budget (GAO, 2000; see also GASB, 1999). The U.S. Office of Management and Budget in the Executive Office of the President consolidates these measures in the federal budget each year. Agency managers and professionals provide, in annual performance reports to Congress, information on how well they have achieved their goals and performance measures in the previous fiscal year. Thus, from both private and public prototype budgets and guidelines, we find more emphasis on strategic planning with measurable results, annual plans with measurable results, costed-out annual plans or performance budgets, and plans broken down ultimately to the individual level with the goal of compensating individuals accordingly.

Given the history of reform movements in the United States at all levels of government, we may ask, how is this reform similar to the past? Larkey and Devereux (1999, 167) categorize past reforms in five different ways:

First there are the rationalizing reforms that emphasize enhanced analysis and reason. Second, there are ad hoc norms such as balance and annularity that have been evolving over the last 150 years or so in Western democracies and have been expressed in a variety of administrative reforms. Third, there are democratizing reforms that seek to open the decision processes to inform and involve citizens better. Fourth, there are power shifting reforms such as line-item vetoes that adjust authority and responsibility for budgeting, particularly

between executives and legislatures. Fifth, there are control reforms such as auditing, tax limitations, and balanced budget amendments that attempt to impose external constraints on decisional behaviors.

These budget process reforms, with their emphasis on economic analysis of costs and benefits or marginal utility, especially Planning, Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) and zero-based budgeting (ZBB), belong to the rationalizing reforms category. The concepts of budget balance, comprehensiveness, and annularity belong to the ad hoc norm tradition. Freedom of information and sunshine laws are part of the democratizing movement. The line-item veto is one of a number of reforms in the power shifting tradition, in which reform shifted some element of control among executives, legislators, and public managers. The fifth tradition, greater control, usually developed to address “the problems of fraud, waste, and abuse in the handling of public money . . . [with] audits auditing the auditors who audit the auditors, all overseen by legislators looking for political advantage and a sporadically attentive public” (1999, 178).

The performance-based reforms, however, combine elements of all five movements. Additional elements cover the inclusion of planning, relative value comparisons, and productivity analysis. Ad hoc norms among performance-based reforms include what Larkey and Devereux call “decisional efficiency,” primarily the savings in time and effort that come with decentralization, and “feasible comparisons”—the stimulation of competition or cooperation, as appropriate, among agencies in solving particular problems. Democratizing reforms come from the wider scope of accountability problems the reforms try to tackle with explicit attention to greater stakeholder and citizen participation and involvement. Power-shifting reforms entail broad decentralization of power over budgets, implicit incentives to reallocate funds from lower to higher priority programs, and the retention of savings when improvements in efficiency provide them. Finally, performance-based reforms produce a reversal of the traditional reform emphasis on increasing input controls to provide greater output controls. Thus, performance-based reforms clearly signal a massive effort to reform government.

The present concern for results or performance nevertheless builds on the past while contributing much that is new. According to Cothran (1993, 450),

the latest trends in budgeting contain elements of the earlier reforms. They contain performance measures from performance budgeting, functional categories from program budgeting, negotiation of objectives from management by objectives, and ranking of objectives from zero-base budgeting. But there are some differences between the old reforms and the latest ones. The latter

are generally simpler, more streamlined, and require less paperwork and analysis. They involve more discretion by line managers than did the earlier reforms, and there is a much greater emphasis on accountability than under the older formats. Finally, the recent reforms are motivated by a desire to change fundamentally the culture of public management by turning bureaucrats into entrepreneurs. Previous budgetary reforms pursued legality, efficiency, and effectiveness. The present wave of budgetary reform aims to stimulate motivation. The new approaches incorporate most of the goals of the previous reforms, but they seek to achieve them through decentralized incentives that give program managers greater authority to combine resources as they think best but that hold the managers accountable for the results.

The performance-based reforms also have come at a time of clashing national priorities and movements at all levels of government. The setting for reform has been a period of change that has seen budget cutting and surplus dividing, sometimes at the same time, making this a different era for reform. As Radin observes (1998, 311), “[The Results Act accentuates] planning. The tradition of planning is embedded in an era of growth; plans are most often used as a way to choose new directions or to expand programs.” Strategic plans in performance-based reforms, therefore, must deal with issues not as new initiatives added to existing programs but as reallocations that eliminate an existing program if a new one is proposed.

The nature of government service delivery now runs counter to the direction traditional reforms took. Devolution and privatization, compounding the existing fragmentation in decision making, play against strategic planning’s usual emphasis on centralization. The fundamental nature of entitlements and block grants reduces much of the budget’s ability to force compliance with state and national spending and performance priorities.

The mixed ideological motives of those who support performance-based reforms also looms large. Again, Radin observes (1998, 311–312, quoting Shin, 1997): “It is clear that some proponents of the legislation are those who advocate good government for its own sake, but . . . ‘[while] performance measures could give an agency that’s targeted for extinction proof of its effectiveness, such standards could also provide Members [of Congress] determined to sink an agency just the ammo they need’.”

Performance-based reforms deal widely with organization change, so why the emphasis on budget reform too? From the earliest days of management improvement programs, and especially with recent efforts to reinvent government programs and organizations and orient them to getting results, budgeting has played an integral role. Consider this range of opinions why: First, no other decision-making system has the leverage to pressure departments to improve program management like the budget. Second, the budget process has always been and always will be the place

where everyone raises questions of the efficiency, economy, effectiveness, productivity, impact, and results of government activities. Third, the power of the purse is a formidable weapon in getting results. And, finally, only budget offices can stimulate, goad, and even inspire agencies to strengthen their programs, operating systems, and organizational structures (Schick, 1966; Caiden, 1998).

Overall, the aim of Results Acts is high, intuitive, and in keeping with traditional reform ideas of accountability and governance. The aim is high given the consolidation of information that a performance budget would provide—everything everyone accomplished, how they accomplished it, and how much it cost. The aim is intuitive, as Niskanen simply states (1971, 42): “[A] bureau that performs better than expected is likely to be rewarded by higher future budgets.” The aim is in keeping with traditional reform in that “systematic presentation of performance information alongside budget amounts will improve budget decision-making” (GAO, 1999, 2).

The Lack of a Budgetary Theory

The budget theory underlying Results Acts is not beyond dispute, however, and therein lies the eventual path these performance-based reforms will take toward budgeting success or failure. Since empirical research began to accumulate, some have warned budgeteers to “avoid too good results” (Wildavsky, 1964, 93). Why?

The danger of claiming superb accomplishments is that Congress and the Budget Bureau may reward the agency by ending the program. “Why would you need five more people in the supervisory unit?” John Rooney inquired of the Justice Department. “Since you are doing so well, as we have heard for fifteen minutes, you surely do not need any more supervision.” However good it may be said that results are, it is advisable to put equal stress on what remains to be done. “Progress has been realized in the past,” the Civil Defense agency asserted, “but we cannot permit these past accomplishments to lull us into a false sense of security (Wildavsky, 1964, 93).

At least one empirical test confirms Wildavsky’s view and rejects Niskanen’s assertion (Warren, 1975). Other budget behavior observers, such as Schick (1978, 179), have agreed, pointing out that the “budget process conventionally confronts managers with the uncomfortable risk of a loss of funds if they try to purge inefficiencies from their agencies.” The fact that an agency performs well does not inform the decision about the need for additional resources: “[S]hould it be provided with more resources to do an even better job, or should it be cut back on the grounds that its purpose has been achieved and it is no longer needed? . . . If a program is doing

badly, and showing few results, does this mean it should be terminated, or provided with more resources to do a better job?" (Caiden, 1998, 44). In broader issues of resource allocation, Caiden finds performance somewhat irrelevant in deciding "whether a given sum of money is too little, too much, or just right to preserve a species, operate a system of trauma centers, or monitor or control contagious diseases." Political popularity and the necessity of balancing budgets often become the sole reasons for budget decisions. In addition, the technology of performance measurement has not, on the whole, developed beyond the superficial.

Joyce (1993) nevertheless predicts slow but eventual acceptance of performance-based reforms and budgets. He notes (p. 14) that many governments' experiences suggest limited success using performance information for anything more than understanding trade-offs. For an example, he argues that

if the choice were between a job training and an air pollution program, we might know that adding \$100 million more to the EPA budget would make the air cleaner by X amount, while costing Y amount of lost wages from workers who had not been trained. If we had all of these data (and we believed them), that would make decisions more informed; it would not necessarily make the choices easier.

Given how budgeting works now, many find performance-based reforms success hard to envision. Joyce, for one (1993, 14), says, "A system that affords less control over individual line items in order to hold agencies solely accountable for results would be a fundamental change from the current system." The current budget system tends to encourage micromanagement of resources by political leaders rather than the macromanagement of values that Key (1940) suggests as the sole prerogative and most important function of politics.

How, then, will performance-based reforms influence budgets? Joyce argues that eventual acceptance will come as the result of "a culture change" brought about by valid information—to which we would add agreed-upon measures of results, clearly articulated authorizations and appropriations, and the delegation of management to public administrators whose discretion the budget rewards. This is a tall order.

Reforms will also change budgeting by not forcing performance information into a decisive role in budgeting but forcing budgeteers to oversee management improvements. The reforms have forced management improvement functions into the budget office when federal, state, and local government budget offices became OMBs—offices of management and budget. At the same time, budget offices have become more independent of finance offices—traditionally the tax collection, accounting, purchasing,

debt management, and budgeting office, and more allied with the chief administrative or operating officer or the chief executive officer. Questions quickly emerge about the capacity of a budget office—possibly knowledgeable about costs and concerned most with overall spending and tax levels—to review managerial issues and performance. Can a budget office cope with management improvement on top of budget examination and control? Should the budget manager be responsible for management improvement? Hildreth (1983) suggests that existing professional disclosure standards, with which most financial officers are quite familiar, serve as a ready basis for productivity analysis, making many aspects of performance-based management reform amenable to existing technologies and ways of thinking.

Others are not as optimistic and even see a period in which budget offices may drift and lose their comfortable anchors. At the federal level, the Results Act came after reductions on the management side in the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (Moe, 1994). What will budget officers do? According to Schick (1990, 33),

[t]he old controller role is slipping away and, along with it, the leverage that budget officials exercised over departments as well as a part of their data base for monitoring expenditures. Central staff understand that it does not suffice for them to make the big decisions while ceding all the details to spenders. They hope that performance measures will substitute for the lost information and controls while giving them an important niche in the management process. Yet they are not sure things will work out this way. While the budget offices . . . generally support decentralization, they worry that the new performance-based system will leave them without effective roles or controls. They are not confident that performance measurement will go beyond technique to the behavior of managers. Departments will “take the money and run,” one budget official protested. But he also conceded that the old controls are no longer viable.

Thus decentralization and devolution as well as a results orientation in performance-based reforms are replacing traditional structures and institutions. The budget theory is not clear, although eventual use of performance information in budgeting seems likely.

What role budget offices will play and with what tools remain matters to be worked out over time. From Schick's analysis, it is possible to propose broad outlines, and four crucial roles suggest themselves so far. First, budget officers will become forecasters of far more phenomena to support agency planning and target setting, just as is typical of private sector budgeting. Second, budget officers will be asked at least to compile and probably to verify performance information. Third, budget officers will act to

encourage the maximization of performance in spending choices. Finally, budget officers will play a greater role in the design of controls that force the identification of objectives and intended results in advance and ensure that the results managers obtain are achieved through lawful means.

Performance-based reforms have become a major movement and are now often compared with the reform movement at the last turn of the century. For budgeting, however, this reform movement resembles much that has happened in previous budget reform episodes. Budget offices in the past have changed from staffs of accountants to staffs of economists. Will they now be staffed with organization and management theorists, or will they be mere record keepers and reporters? Will the basic forces of budgetary decision making remain the same?

Focus of This Book and Overview of Its Contents

This book provides the classic ideas that underlie the reforms linking budgeting decisions with the performance of government agencies found in the journals sponsored by the American Society for Public Administration. The first section of the book provides the conceptual rationale for the linkage between performance and budgeting. The positive and negative aspects are laid out, the section closes with several reviews of current practices that provide something of an optimistic sense of eventual accomplishment.

The second section of the book deals directly with the issues related to performance-based budgeting and its relationship to larger management issues. We break down the parts of the performance model into three components—strategic planning, performance management, and pay-for-performance—and illustrate with discussion from the literature.

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