

**Transcript of Remarks by Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND)  
at Hearing on Budget Resolution / Reconciliation Process  
February 12, 2009**

I want to welcome everyone to the Budget Committee this morning. I especially want to welcome our most senior member, Senator Byrd, who is also a valued member of this Committee. Today's hearing will focus on Senate procedures for consideration of the budget resolution and reconciliation.

I would like to address the practice known here as vote-a-rama. Before I go further, I want to make very clear that I have no interest in restricting the rights of the Minority. I have been in the Minority. I have been in the Majority, and am acutely aware that we might be in the Minority again, and so I am absolutely devoted to continuing the full rights of the Minority. That is not the issue before this hearing.

The fundamental issue before us is: Can we improve the process? Can we make it better? I think many of us felt acutely after last year that there had to be a better way. I think those of us who have been most deeply involved have felt this for many years. But last year because the presidential candidates were coming and going and it forced the votes into a very short period of time, at least the key votes, it became, I think, even more apparent than it has been, certainly to the general membership of the Senate, that this system really needs a review and reworking.

I am delighted to have Senator Byrd as a witness today. Senator Byrd is a giant in the Senate. He is the Senate's President Pro Tempore, a former Majority Leader, and a valued member of this Committee. And he is a leading expert on Senate rules and procedures and played a critical role in the creation of the Congressional Budget Act under which we operate.

Senator Specter will also be here. Senator Specter is the Ranking Member and former Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. He is also an expert on Senate rules and procedures. He has introduced legislation, Senate Resolution 29, that builds on the ideas put forward by Senator Byrd on reforming the vote-a-rama process. So I very much look forward to both of their testimony.

Let me begin by making clear why we have vote-a-rama. Under the Congressional Budget Act, the budget resolution and reconciliation bills are given special fast-track treatment that limits debate – 50 hours for a budget resolution and 20 hours for a reconciliation bill. This means that these measures cannot be filibustered. As a way to protect the rights of the Minority, the Budget Act allows an unlimited number of amendments to be filed, even after all time has expired on the resolution or the bill. So as frustrating as vote-a-rama may be for all of us, the ability to offer unlimited amendments is meant to safeguard Minority rights. Again, I want to make clear I have no interest in truncating Minority rights.

But there are real problems with vote-a-rama, and I think they became even more clear last year. Number one, it results in many back-to-back votes, sometimes continuing for days, with little time for review and debate. And some of these amendments have far reaching consequences. As a result, Senators often are not fully certain of the implication of the amendment they are voting on. I mean when you have a debate that last two minutes, one minute a side, and nobody has seen the

amendment until 15 minutes before it is voted on, we have a problem.

The number of amendments offered to budget resolutions has generally been rising. According to the Congressional Research Service, the last three years are among the top five years with the most amendments offered. You can see that in 2008 we saw the most amendments ever offered – 113.

The number of roll call votes on budget resolutions has also generally been rising. And, disturbingly, the percentage of votes taken on amendments offered after all time has expired has been rising. This means that Senators are increasingly taking votes on amendments that were given no real time for debate. In 2008, we had 40 votes – 60 percent of which were on amendments that were given no time for debate.

Here are some potential ways to reform the vote-a-rama process:

- We could create filing deadlines for 1st and 2nd degree amendments. This would prevent amendments from being filed after all time has expired and hopefully allow more time for debate.
- We could increase the number of amendments debated prior to vote-a-rama by reducing the time allotted to each amendment. Again, this would hopefully encourage more substantive debate on amendments.
- We could require a brief “lay over” period to review amendments.
- And we could allow the yielding back of time only by unanimous consent. This would help protect Senators’ rights to continue debate on amendments, in light of the other changes we might make that would limit amendments being offered.

I have not formed any hard and fast opinion on any of these. I am completely open to what we might agree to jointly as a way of reforming the process. I know we have strong majorities here in the Committee and on the Floor, and that we could ram through rule changes, perhaps. I have no intention of doing that. I want to make that very clear. That’s not what this exercise is about. I am interested, though, in working together to see if we can’t improve the process.