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Gov's Budget is Key to State Policy Choices

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"Follow the money" was Deep Throat's advice to cub reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein back in Watergate days. It remains one of the sagest bits of political advice ever offered. If you really want to understand politics, there's no substitute for knowing who's privately paying what politician for which public favor, not to mention knowing where public monies finally wind up being spent. As applied to Wisconsin politics, that means keeping track of our increasingly corrupt system of campaign financing, and delving into the intricacies of the state budget. In the next few columns, I want to talk about the second.

Boring, right?

Wrong. This is actually the Big Kahuna of state politics. For right or wrong, this is where the action really is.

For starters, as another political operative once noted, recall that "budgets are not merely affairs of arithmetic, but in a thousand ways go to the root of prosperity for individuals, the relations of the classes, and the strength of the kingdom." Thus William Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, reminding us that budgets are political documents, not just ledger sheets. They record the policy choices a government makes, and the struggle behind those choices - the very stuff of politics.

But what's particularly important in Wisconsin is that the proposed budget of a Governor - as in the one Governor MacCallum recently plopped before the legislature - is not just a particularly important moment in that struggle, but often its effective end. The reason is that, to a degree unrivalled elsewhere in the U.S., Wisconsin has ceded the Governor power to decide what our government is.

This wasn't always the case. Wisconsin governors were once hemmed in by both a range of independent commissions and a legislature with real power. At the beginning of the last century, in fact, the legislature sought to tie the Governor's policy hands by submitting "omnibus" state spending bills for the state's executive to sign or veto in their entirety, with the latter move stopping government dead until the legislature came up with something new.

It was in reaction to that overreaching that Wisconsin voters in 1930, by popular referendum, eventually amended the state constitution to give the Governor "partial veto" power over legislative proposals. Meant to restore balance between the executive and legislature, it basically worked to that effect for much of our mid-20th century history.

Beginning in the early 1970s, however, Wisconsin governors began to refine and extend this power. Pat Lucey, in 1971, became the first executive to strike single numbers from the budget to change spending levels ("digit veto") and surgically removed words from the text to carefully edit the statutory language. Six years later, Marty Schreiber expanded the partial veto by changing text not simply to modify the legislature's intent, but to enact policies expressly rejected by lawmakers (the "reverse intent veto"). Lee Dreyfus used both these new powers in the early 1980s. Then Tony Earl, not to be outdone, continued the bipartisan gubernatorial power grab by adding the "pick-a-letter" or "Vanna White veto," in which he struck single letters and words to form entirely new words and sentences.

While the creative possibilities of Earl's proposal intrigued Scrabble fans worldwide, back home the public was less impressed. Today, after a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling and a new constitutional amendment, you can only see Vanna in late night reruns of the state's history channel. But much of the "partial veto" power remains, including the power to strike single words, digits, and punctuation marks.

It was really not until Tommy Thompson, however, that we saw its full power not just as an instrument of policy, but the means toward a real revolution in the balance of power within government. Faced with a perennial divided legislature, Thompson would propose budgets and later, confident that his veto would not be overturned simply, veto any change the legislature made that he disagreed with. Thompson exercised this power a staggering 1,937 times during his long reign - better than twice as many times as all previous governors in Wisconsin history combined - and indeed never was overturned by a legislature that increasingly came to recognize itself as a joke. As one legislator observed of the state budget early in Thompson's reign: "We might as well just pass the phonebook" - since the Governor was now deciding all content of state policy.

With power loving nothing like a vacuum, it's also in the interest of anyone with power - which in this state means power with the governor - to pack their requests into the budget document that he controls. This is one reason our state budgets, once relatively short documents but now chock full of all sorts of policy choices and favors well beyond the basics of taxing and spending, have grown to be bigger than phonebooks - but about as unread as political thrillers by the general public.

Which of course is the point. How much easier to run a government when nobody knows what you're doing! And besides, everybody knows that what you don't know can't hurt you. Right?

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the

campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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