Congressional "Super-Committee" Basics

August 2011

What is this "super-committee"?

Its real name is the "Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction." It's a special committee of Members of Congress created by the Budget Control Act of 2011 to come up with a plan to reduce the federal deficit over the next decade.

Who are the members?

By law, the super-committee is made up of 12 members: six from the Senate and six from the House. Each delegation is divided evenly between Democrats and Republicans named by their respective party leaders.

The Senate members are: **Patty Murray (D-WA), *Co-Chair;* Max Baucus (D-MT); John Kerry (D-MA); Jon Kyl (R-AZ); Pat Toomey (R-PA);** and **Rob Portman (R-OH).**

The House members are: **Jeb Hensarling (R-5th/TX), *Co-Chair;* Dave Camp (R-4th/MI); Fred Upton (R-6th/MI); Jim Clyburn (D-6th/SC); Xavier Becerra (D-31st/CA);** and **Chris Van Hollen (D-8th/MD).**

What makes it "super"?

If a simple majority (7 members) of the 12-member committee agrees on a deficit-reduction plan, its plan is guaranteed an up-or-down vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate by December 23, 2011 – no filibusters, no amendments allowed. And the super-committee can propose changes in an extremely broad range of policies. The regular congressional committees can make recommendations to the super-committee about changes to laws within the regular committees' jurisdiction, but the super-committee is not required to follow those recommendations.

However, the super-committee can't change the law on its own. If a majority of the super-committee approves a plan, that plan will become law only if it is approved by a majority of the House and Senate and signed by President Obama, or passed over his veto by a two-thirds vote of both the House and Senate.

What policy changes can the super-committee recommend?

Under the law, everything is on the table, including:

- cuts to discretionary programs, both defense and non-defense;
- cuts to mandatory programs, including Social Security, Medicaid, and SNAP/Food Stamps (these and some other programs are only protected from *automatic* cuts if the super-committee plan is not enacted);
- revenue increases, for example from closing tax loopholes or adjusting tax rates; and
- investments to create jobs, strengthen the economy and reduce deficits long-term.

What's the timeline?

The super-committee must vote by November 23 and report to Congress by December 2, 2011. If a majority of the super-committee reports a plan, Congress must vote on it by December 23, 2011.

What if the super-committee doesn't agree on a plan or Congress doesn't pass it?

If Congress fails to approve a plan that reduces the deficit by at least $1.2 trillion over the next decade, under the Budget Control Act, a wide range of spending programs will be subject to automatic cuts, year by year. If Congress passes a plan from the super-committee that cuts the deficit, but by less than $1.2 trillion, the automatic cuts will make up the difference.

Which programs are subject to automatic cuts and which are exempt?

All discretionary spending programs, including those specifically serving low-income people such as WIC and Head Start, will be subject to automatic cuts. Defense and non-defense programs will be cut equally.

Certain mandatory safety net programs, including Social Security, Medicaid, and SNAP/Food Stamps are exempt from automatic cuts; automatic cuts to Medicare are limited.

Tax subsidies – for example, for the oil and gas industry – are not subject to automatic cuts.

When would the automatic cuts take effect?

Under the Budget Control Act, the automatic cuts would start to take effect in January 2013. Congress could pass legislation changing the rules before the automatic cuts take effect.