Fiscal Oversight and Program Evaluation:

Assessing GAO's Impact on Spending and the Federal Budget Process

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The Budgetary Process

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the impact of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the federal budget and spending processes. It does so by assessing the agency's historic and existing functions; interaction with the national deficit and debt; role in the budget process; impact on taxes and entitlement programs; relationship to congressional appropriations and authorizing legislation; influence in identifying government waste and fraud; contact with political and special interest groups; and proposals to reform the agency moving forward. The research demonstrates that GAO plays an important role in reducing federal deficits through its recommendations on cost savings and improved revenue collection, annual financial audits, and program evaluations of a variety of agencies. However, its impact in these areas is ultimately limited by executive and congressional willingness to prioritize and implement its suggestions.

Introduction

Over the last decade, spending deficits for the federal government have consistently risen, peaking during the COVID-19 pandemic of fiscal years (FYs) 2021 and 2021 at around $3T, while remaining at an elevated level of $1.8T during FY 2025 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2026). In this context of continued deficits, strengthening the role of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in conducting audits and evaluations to identify inefficiencies, potential cost savings, improper payments, and recommendations for both discretionary and entitlement programs have become ever more important in the effort to work towards a more fiscally responsible future for the federal government.

As such, this paper will set out to formally assess and describe the agency's impact on the budget process and federal deficit. It will begin by providing a background and history of the GAO's primary functions before exploring the agency's interaction with the federal debt and deficit. The paper will then continue with an analysis of the GAO's effect on the budget process, taxes and entitlement programs, and authorizing and appropriations legislation. Moving on, it will assess GAO's role in identifying government waste and its relationship to political and special interest groups. Finally, the paper will provide an overall analysis and synthesis of the previous sections, before providing a summary of recommendations to reform the agency and offering concluding remarks about the agency and personal takeaways from this research.

Throughout these sections, this paper will ultimately argue that GAO plays an important role in the federal budget process, reducing deficits by conducting annual audits and evaluating critical programs to identify mechanisms to cut spending and increase government revenues, despite being limited by the degree to which Congress and executive agencies prioritize and implement its recommendations.

Background and History

The GAO was formally established under the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, which authorized, under Title III, the creation of an, “Establishment of the Government to be known as the General Accounting Office, which shall be independent of the executive departments and under the control and direction of the Comptroller General of the United States” (Budget and Accounting Act of 1921), charged with investigating all matters related to the, “Receipt, disbursement, and application of public funds” (Budget and Accounting Act of 1921).

The creation of such a General Accounting Office (renamed to its current Government Accountability Office in 2004), as noted by McDonough et al. (2024), was conducted in the context of renewed attention on efficiency and oversight of public administration in the wake of World War I, which significantly increased government spending and debt. GAO’s establishment additionally marked a shift in responsibility for the financial management and auditing of government spending, away from the executive branch (previously undertaken by the Office of the Comptroller and six auditors situated under the Treasury Department) and towards the legislative branch, creating an additional layer of independence when coupled with the 15-year non-renewable term established for the presidentially appointed Comptroller General.

As further described by McDonough et al. (2024), over the course of its 100-plus-year history and eight different permanent Comptroller Generals, GAO’s purpose and mission has substantially transformed. Under the direction of John McCarl, the first Comptroller General, appointed under the Harding presidential administration, the agency was focused on conducting compliance audits of expenditure vouchers to confirm that spending and tax collection in executive agencies were being implemented in compliance with statutory requirements.

However, by 1945, the agency's workforce had expanded from 1,700 employees in 1921 to more than 14,000 (U.S. GAO, GAO Past and Present), again spurred by a rapid increase in military spending and associated paperwork during World War 2, creating a significant backlog in the agency's primary function of auditing spending vouchers. Responding to the difficulty experienced in keeping up with such a deluge of vouchers, GAO decided to change its approach in the aftermath of the war, cutting its workforce back to around 7,000 employees by 1951 and refocusing its efforts more comprehensively on evaluating financial controls and management throughout the federal government, transferring responsibilities of auditing each transaction back to the executive branch (U.S. GAO, GAO Working for Good Government Since 1921).

In the 1970's, the agency's authority was again expanded by Congress to provide a wider range of financial, economic, legal, research, and consulting services to aid in program evaluation of executive agencies, requiring an equivalent broadening in the composition of the agency's workforce (U.S. GAO, GAO Past and Present). This transformation has continued throughout the 1980s to the present, as GAO's leadership and workforce have adapted and modernized its functions, aligning the agency's expertise and capabilities with the most pressing challenges of the day. In doing so, it continues to provide not only broad financial auditing standards across the federal government and specific recommendations for cost savings and spending reductions, but also evaluates and researches a variety of critical economic challenges ranging from technological change to demographic decline and globalization (U.S. GAO, GAO Working for Good Government Since 1921). Despite this constantly changing collection of services provided over the last 100 years, GAO today continues to interact significantly with the federal debt and deficit, in ways that the following section will describe in more detail.

Interaction with the Federal Debt

The Government Accountability Office plays a substantial role in relation to the national deficit and debt, primarily through its identification of savings recommendations across the government, but also through its broad thought leadership on the fiscal future of the U.S. and methods to stimulate economic development, thus increasing revenue collection and further reducing the deficit. However, before any of these impacts, the agency most directly interacts with the federal deficit by incurring spending of its own. For FY 2026, GAO's budget request amounted to $933M (U.S. GAO, Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request), a desired increase of $122M of 15% from FY2025, to support the efforts of a workforce of roughly 3,500 employees of full-time equivalents (FTEs) and an increase of over $430M since 2008, during which GAO received appropriations of just under $500M for a workforce of 3,000 FTEs (U.S. GAO, Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Request). Ultimately, as will be discussed again in the sections to follow, the amount appropriated for GAO in FY 2026, despite its requested budget increase, was $812M, reflecting no change from either FY 2025 or FY 2024 (119th Congress, Continuing Appropriations).

While like every agency, GAO interacts with the debt and deficit by requiring its own funding, its primary impact in this area is in exploring and identifying potential savings opportunities throughout other federal departments through its extensive program evaluations and financial audits. The cumulative outcomes of these various efforts are summarized in GAO's annual Performance and Accountability Report, which, for FY 2025, showed that the agency yielded over $62B in financial benefits for the federal government, across 1,833 new recommendations and 1,295 identified improvements in government operations (U.S. GAO, Performance and Accountability Report). These savings yielded across the rest of the federal government, as the previous report shows, when considering funding incurred by the GAO itself, amount to an average return on investment of $116 saved for every $1 appropriated for GAO.

In addition to the impact of its program evaluations and recommendations for operational and cost-saving improvements across federal agencies, GAO also produces an annual report to Congress on the state of the nation's fiscal health that outlines critical trends in the federal debt, primary deficit, and interest spending, as well as reiterates the urgency for a cohesive strategy for addressing the mounting spending imbalance. The 2025 iteration of the report (U.S. GAO, the Nations Fiscal Health) highlighted the alarming growth in debt as a percent of GDP (reaching nearly 100% by the end of FY 2024), which it noted was particularly troubling since such increases have occurred during a period of economic expansion rather than contraction or war, as has historically occurred. Furthermore, GAO points out that projecting forward, debt could reach 200% of GDP as quickly as 2047, driven by stagnant revenue, rising programmatic spending, and rapidly growing net interest owed on existing debt. This fiscal posture, the report argues, exposes the nation to a variety of risks, ranging from natural disasters and climate change to public health and financial crises, that the country would be markedly less resilient to recovering from because of its rising debt.

Finally, to mitigate some of the concerns related to the nation's continued deficit, GAO produces several recommendations and reports each year on topics related to economic development that support federal efforts to incentivize activity in critical economic sectors, increasing federal revenue and lowering spending and debt relative to GDP. Examples from the FY 2025 of such targeted thought leadership and research include reports on the Department of Commerce's efforts to spur domestic manufacturing of semiconductor chips (U.S. GAO, Semiconductors), methods for improving funding for small business research in innovative technologies (U.S. GAO, Small Business Research Programs), and the use of automatic stabilizers across various federal programs to avoid severe and harmful recessions (U.S. GAO, Economic Downturns). Taken in combination with the agency's cost savings recommendations and annual assessment of the nation's fiscal health, such research demonstrates the GAO's important role in interacting with the federal deficit, providing actionable insights on spending, economic expansion, revenue, and the debt.

Federal Budget Process

Narrowing in more on how the agency fits into the various stages of the overall funding process, this paper will first assess GAO's relationship to the budget formulation process, which it plays a relatively minor role in compared to its functions across other stages of the fiscal cycle. Beginning with how the budget for the agency is requested and developed, because it is a congressional office, the process for setting the initial budget follows a different timeline than executive agencies and departments, which observe procedures established by the same legislation (the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921) that authorized the creation of GAO itself, and is coordinated between the agencies submitting requests and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). For agencies situated under the legislative branch, which, alongside GAO, include components such as the Congressional Research Service, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Government Publishing Office, a different set of steps is followed that largely removes any input from OMB and the executive branch.

GAO begins by developing its annual budget request for the upcoming fiscal year, which includes gathering historical information from previous years, detailing the specific program areas and line items funding will be used for, and providing a justification for any proposed changes in spending, as illustrated in the agency's most recent request of $933M for FY 2026, (U.S. GAO, Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request). This budget request is presented for testimony by the Comptroller General to the House Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, which is situated under the House Appropriations Committee, and took place in April 2025 for the FY 2026 budget submission (Congressional Research Service, Legislative Branch Appropriations). Following custom and law, as outlined in both U.S. Code (31 U.S.C. § 1105, Budget contents and submission to Congress) and OMB regulations (OMB, Circular A-11), budget requests for the legislative branch are then submitted to the President and OMB before October 16 each year and included in the Presidential Budget without change or input from the executive branch. For FY 2026, the outcome of this process can be observed in the submission of the supplement and appendix to the Presidential Budget in May 2025, which outlined GAO's request for $933M in funding, without executive branch revision (OMB, Technical Supplement to the 2026 Budget).

Six weeks after submission of the Presidential Budget, the Congressional Budget Process, established under the Congressional Impoundment and Control Act of 1974 (H.R.7130, 1974) begins in the House and Senate Budget Committees, with each Committee holding hearings and developing resolutions for the next FY's upcoming budget. Discrepancies between the two resolutions are addressed during a budget conference as necessary, during which time decisions on including any reconciliation instructions or additional provisions are made. This process concludes with the passage of a concurrent budget resolution, as can be observed for FY 2025 (H. Con. Res. 14, 2025), used as a framework for guiding the passage of appropriations legislation for the various programs and agencies outlined in the budget, as will be discussed more in the sections to follow.

Taxes and Entitlement

While the Government Accountability Office has no direct role in either the collection of taxes and revenue through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or the administration of entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, it plays a substantial indirect role in both areas through its annual financial audit of IRS statements and its continued applied research on issues and mitigation strategies surrounding tax collection, enforcement, and tax expenditures, as well as major entitlement programs. Through these efforts, GAO can draw public, executive, and congressional attention to challenges in revenue collection and provision of entitlement benefits, improving operations across these core governmental functions.

Beginning with the agency's indirect interaction with tax enforcement and collection, GAO issues opinions and conducts an audit of the financial statements and internal controls of the IRS on an annual basis. For FY 2025, GAO found IRS statements and processes used to ensure reliable authorization and recording of tax collection transactions to be generally effective, while highlighting areas for improvement, including accounting for unpaid balances

(U.S. GAO, Financial Audit). Demonstrating the importance of such annual audits, the report additionally highlights the response of the IRS, which indicated its dedication to addressing the concerns identified by GAO. In this spirit of continual improvement, outside of its annual formal audit, GAO additionally conducts research and develops reports on a variety of tax-related topics involving the IRS and other revenue collection agencies. Examples of such program evaluations and recommendations from just the last year include a reports: assessing the effectiveness of the IRS's implementation of a range of projects aimed at operations and taxpayer services since the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, recommending that the agency continue to use evidence-based assessments to understand their impact on the taxpayer experience (U.S. GAO, Taxpayer Experience); exploring oversight of paid tax preparers by the IRS, many of whom are classified as unenrolled preparers rather than tax practitioners, and are therefore not subject to strict education or testing requirements (U.S. GAO, Paid Tax Preparers); and an annual summary of the priority high priority recommendations made by GAO related to the IRS that remain open or unresolved, including addressing the tax gap, improving taxpayer experience, and better managing organizational change (U.S. GAO, Open Priority Recommendations: IRS). Of these high-risk priorities identified in this final report (of which there were 30 in 2024), the study notes importantly that 5 have been implemented by the IRS over the last year, demonstrating that the agency's suggestions are resulting in real operational impacts through execution rather than simply being identified but not actioned.

Moving on to the agency's interaction with entitlement programs, while not directly involved in the administration of benefits or legislation to reform operations, GAO indirectly affects the nation's various entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, similarly to its impact on revenue collection, through research and identification of issues and solutions for resolution by congressional and executive leadership. For social security, an example of such reporting includes a similar annual summary to that developed for the IRS, of the priority recommendations made by GAO involving the Social Security Administration (SSA), that remain open or unresolved, including ensuring program integrity, improving service delivery, and more effectively assessing software licenses (U.S. GAO, Priority Open Recommendations: Social Security Administration). Of the 4 high-risk areas highlighted in 2024, GAO notes that SSA had already implemented one (better protecting personally identifiable information) of its suggestions by 2025. For Medicare, an example of GAO's work includes a 2026 report evaluating the effectiveness of a new rule recently published in the Federal Register by the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, that seeks to address a regulatory loophole in proposals for tax waivers. (U.S. GAO, Department of Health and Human Services). Finally, in addition to demonstrating GAO's impact on a critical entitlement program such as Medicare, this report also highlights one of GAO's broader legally mandated responsibilities (5 U.S.C. § 801(a)(2)(A), 2020) of evaluating procedural compliance for submission of new "major" rules and regulations across all federal agencies.

Authorization and Appropriation

Exploring the interaction between authorizing and annual appropriations legislation and the GAO's operations, the agency is both affected significantly by both forms of bills, as well as plays a role in appropriations disputes for other agencies. Beginning with authorizing legislation, which establishes, continues, and modifies government programs, GAO was established, as previously described in the section on the agency's history, by the Budget and Accounting Act of

1921, which authorized the creation of a congressional agency to track the spending and use of federal funds (Budget and Control Act of 1921). As the agency's roles and responsibilities in carrying out this broad function have transformed over time in line with the expansion of the federal government, several additional authorizing bills have been passed by Congress that formally modify aspects of the agency. Examples of such legislation include: the previously discussed Congressional Impoundment and Control Act of 1974, which defined GAO's role in reviewing special requests by the President to impound funds previously appropriated by Congress, reporting findings of misclassification of impoundments, and filing a civil action in court to compel the president to release budget authority for funds (H.R.7130, 1974); the GAO Human Capital Reform Act of 2004, which changed the name of the GAO from its former General Accounting Office to its present Government Accountability Office, and reformed several aspects of the agency's human capital policies, such as authorizing annual pay rate changes and establishing an executive exchange program with private sector organizations (H.R.2751, 2004); and the GAO Access and Oversight Act of 2016, which strengthened GAO's authority to access federal agency records required to audit and evaluate government programs, as well as required agencies to submit planned actions in response to GAO recommendations to the congressional committees with jurisdiction over them (H.R.5690, 2016).

In contrast to such authorizing legislation, which establishes or reforms federal programs, annual appropriations bills provide the actual funding required to operate federal agencies and programs from year-to-year. As such, GAO, like other discretionary spending areas, is impacted substantially by appropriations legislation. For GAO specifically, this process begins in the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, after receiving 302(a) allocations from either a concurrent or deeming budget resolution, which set spending limits for each appropriations committee, respectively. Following this, each committee then further determines 302(b) allocations across the 12 appropriations subcommittees, for which the Legislative Branch Subcommittees in both chambers have jurisdiction over spending levels for GAO. The House has historically taken the lead in drafting the first proposal for consideration, which is marked up and approved within the Legislative Branch Subcommittee, the Appropriations Committee, and finally reported for full consideration on the House floor, under the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union. For FY 2026, this consideration of the Legislative Branch Appropriations Act (H.R. 4249, 2025) took place in June 2025, which proposed a funding level of $415M for GAO, a decrease of almost $400M from the previous year. Within the Senate, a similar process of reporting up from the Subcommittee level to consideration on the full floor culminated in the introduction of an appropriations act (H.R. 4249, 2025) in June 2025 to maintain funding for GAO at the same level as FY 2025, in which $811M was allocated, for FY 2026. Ultimately, funding for GAO was bundled together in a minibus continuing appropriations bill originating in the House (H.R.5371, 2025) alongside spending on agriculture, military construction, and veterans' affairs, which was passed and signed into law November 2025 following a government shutdown on October 1, with funding for GAO following the Senate recommendation to remain unchanged from the previous year's level of $811M.

Finally, GAO is not only impacted itself by outcomes of appropriations legislation but plays a unique role in assessing and publishing formal decisions on appropriations law controversies involving disputes between other federal agencies and Congress (Pasachoff et al., 2025), as well as reviewing impoundment requests and filing actions to force the release of impounded funds, when necessary, as described earlier through the Congressional Impoundment and Control Act (1974). Taken together, these functions provide a significant platform through which GAO impacts appropriations across the entire landscape of the federal government.

Transparency and Government Waste

However, it is in its efforts to improve transparency in government programs by evaluating and publicly identifying systemic waste, improper payment, and fraud across the bureaucracy, and recommending mitigation strategies for addressing them, that GAO makes perhaps its most significant fiscal impact on the budget process. Examples abound of the agency's efforts in this area, fulfilling one of GAO's core functions to understand how taxpayer dollars are spent and help the government work more efficiently.

For instance, the agency annually issues a report on opportunities to reduce fragmentation, overlap, and duplication across the federal landscape, with its 2025 version (U.S. GAO, 2025 Annual Report) highlighting over 550 opportunities and 148 new recommendations identified to improve efficiency and cut costs, including creating statutory requirements for annual IT portfolio review throughout federal agencies and leveraging data analytics in the Department of Defense's fraud risk management strategy. The implementation of over 1,400 past recommendations in this series, out of over 2,000 total (71% rate), has already reportedly yielded the government $725B in savings, with $67B more identified in 2025.

In addition to its efforts to bring greater public transparency to instances of fragmentation and overlap across the federal bureaucracy, GAO has explicitly reported on systemic challenges agencies face with improper payment and fraud through its annual financial audits since 1997 and has additionally developed summary reports on government-wide challenges and recommendations for resolving them. The most recent such report (U.S. GAO, Improper Payments), published in 2025, showed that in FY 2204 alone, an estimated $162B in improper payments were made (84% of which were due to overpayment by the government), excluding several programs that are highly susceptible to improper payments, which would cause this number to rise even higher. The report shows that 75% of these payments stemmed from one of 5 program areas (Medicare, Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the Restaurant Revitalization Fund) and highlighted several strategies to improve the situation, including creating a permanent “center of excellence” to provide oversight in identifying fraud and improper payments.

Finally, to further draw public attention and bring accountability to areas of concern in the federal government, GAO publishes an annual high-risk series on programs that are especially susceptible to waste, fraud, and abuse. In 2025, this report (U.S. GAO, High Risk Series) emphasized 38 such critical issues, including improving the delivery of disaster assistance to individuals and localities, controlling cost growth in high-value procurement across the Departments of Defense and Energy, and reducing the property holdings of the government to cut down on operating costs. Of the items that have been identified on this list in previous iterations since its inception in 1990, progress in them have purportedly yielded the government over $750B in savings, with $84B saved across the last two years alone based on improvement across 10 different risk areas, including business systems modernization, emergency loans for small businesses, and the security clearance process for government personnel.

Politics and Special Interest Groups

Critical to effectively fulfilling this important role in the budgetary and spending process of uncovering and creating accountability for instances of waste, inefficiency, and potential fraud throughout the government is GAO's independence from political and special interest groups. To maintain this freedom from interference and influence, the agency was both established with certain protections and takes several discrete and continuous actions, outlined in a recent report (U.S. GOA, GAO is Nonpartisan). To begin, established by law, the Comptroller General serves a 15-year term, which spans multiple presidential and congressional terms to insulate the agency from partisanship. Furthermore, they are presidentially nominated and congressional confirmed, but can only be removed by Congress, further protecting them from potential executive branch interference from the agencies GAO must audit and evaluate.

In addition to these structural protections, GAO regularly publishes updates to its rulebook of Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (U.S. GAO, Government Auditing Standards), which applies both internally to employees at GAO as well as serves as a model for other federal agencies and private organizations to conduct audits with objectivity and integrity. It describes several recommended practices for ensuring organizational independence for auditors, including completing an annual financial disclosure for workers to attest they have no financial stake in the outcome of assessment they are performing, requiring approval for participating in certain activities outside of work like serving on another organization's board of directors, and documenting any potential threats to independence so that adequate safeguards can be put in place.

However, despite these efforts from both a legal and policy perspective to protect itself from outside influence, the agency is not immune from external criticism and claims that it is acting with partisan motivations. Most recently, such backlash (Scholtes et al., 2025) has come primarily from members of the Republican Party, most notably within the Office of Management and Budget, who have taken issue with GAO reports and legal decisions related to the executive branch's impoundment of funds appropriated by Congress for several purposes, including the war in Ukraine. While this duty of reviewing and taking legal action on presidential impoundment requests, as discussed in the section on authorization and appropriations, is statutorily established, Republicans argue it has been politically weaponized and unevenly applied. As such, taking proactive measures to ensure and demonstrate to external parties that political independence is established is ever more important for GAO to safeguard itself from accusations of outside influence.

Analysis

Evaluating such claims of diminished independence from political pressures, centered specifically around an example of GAO's continued expansion of its functions in responding to impoundment requests, while also assessing the agency's impact on the broader budget, spending, and revenue collection processes, presents a complicated picture of the GAO's evolving role. Analyzing the agency's effectiveness and efficiency of operations within various functions it currently supports, previously referenced assessments conducted by McDonough et al. (2024), as well as by GAO itself in its most recent annual performance review (U.S. GAO, Performance and Accountability Report) show that the agency has experienced significant long-term improvements across multiple metrics, but over the last several years, has seen performance stagnate or even decline in key areas. For example, the reports demonstrate that the number of financial benefits generated by GAO for the federal government has improved substantially over the last several decades (from around $25B in 1986 to $62B in 2025). However, over the short term, benefits have decreased, with $77B yielded in 2020 ($15B more than in 2025).

A similar pattern can be observed in the number of non-financial benefits attributable to GAO, which have increased from 200 in 1994 up to more than 1,400 in 2019 and have decreased back down to 1,300 in 2025. Finally, the number of existing recommendations made by GAO that have been implemented by other federal agencies has similarly improved over time from around 70% in 1998, to between 75-80% over the last decade without marked progress. Taken together, these performance metrics demonstrate the significant improvements made by the agency in the long run in fulfilling many of its core objectives, while also demonstrating a likely need for short-term reform to the agency's operations.

Recommendations

In this spirit, several recommendations for how GAO can reorient its strategies and tactics over the next several years to better align itself with a rapidly transforming political system and priorities and reinvigorate its former performance trajectory have been proposed. Among these, GAO itself has identified several goals and objectives for the agency, alongside both potential challenges and mitigation strategies in achieving them, in its FY 2026 Performance Plan (U.S. GAO, Fiscal Year 2026 Performance Plan). Examples of these potential roadblocks and proposed solutions include addressing the challenge of attracting and maintaining a quality workforce by providing flexible work environments such as hybrid and remote work across both headquarters and the GAO's field offices; improving management of the agency's information technology systems by continuing to transition to a cloud-based model that will support better scalability and resilience while reducing capital expenditures, as well as by strengthening its cybersecurity posture through a zero-trust architecture; and better responding to potential external factors that impact GAO operations such as evolving congressional priorities and inconsistent access to other agencies' information through proactive communication and collaboration to ensure partnerships remain productive and valuable for all parties involved.

In addition to these internal recommendations for areas of potential improvement and emphasis, several external proposals have been offered with the goal of reforming the agency and continuing to modernize its operations and mission for the current political climate. One such example can be found in a recent letter sent by Congressmen Sean Casten, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Illinois serving on the House Financial Services Committee, and signed by over 100 additional members of Congress, to Gene Dodaro, then Comptroller General of the GAO (Casten, 2025). In the letter, Casten highlights a new proposed initiative the agency could undertake that he argues could help GAO reassert its importance in the budget and appropriations processes. Namely, Casten contends that GAO should create a publicly accessible database to monitor the disbursement and spending of funds appropriated in recent legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act to provide accountability and transparency to recent executive actions that have disrupted the implementation and execution of funds for specific programs prioritized in the bills, such as clean energy deployment, grid modernization, and electric vehicle infrastructure. Finally, additional area of reform are identified in a recent proposal from the Foundation for American Innovation (Lips & Dayton, 2025) for GAO to update its operations as the 15-year tenure of Comptroller General Dodaro concludes, including recommendations to explicitly prioritize GAO's focus on forward-looking fiscal responsibility, remove the agency's potentially politically-involved enforcement duties under the Impoundment

Control Act (specifically its authority to take legal action against the executive branch), focus on high-impact audits and program evaluations, and establish a requirement for annual GAO recommendations on rescissions and fiscal savings for Congress and the executive branch. In implementing these suggestions, the authors argue GAO would maximize its impact and effectiveness across its most important budgetary and spending oversight functions while limiting its role in areas that are more politically charged, which could degrade the agency's status as an objective and impartial source of program audits and evaluations in the long-term.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges GAO faces, alongside every government agency, in continuing to modernize and evolve alongside equivalent changes in the political, technological, and managerial landscape, the agency continues to have a substantial impact on the federal government throughout the budgetary, appropriations, and disbursement processes. More specifically, its role can be most significantly felt in its oversight and audits of previously appropriated funds by evaluating and publishing legal decisions on disputes between agencies, review and instigation of legal action in executive branch impoundment requests, and identification of risks, waste, duplication, fraud, and recommendations for mitigation strategies and methods to cut costs and improve effectiveness across a range of federal programs, including entitlement programs and revenue collection.

In the process of researching and writing about these key budgetary and spending functions that GAO affects, I was most surprised to learn how the agency's role has changed over the last 100 years, since its establishment in 1921. While its shift in focus from almost exclusively auditing expenditure vouchers in its inception, to GAO's rapid expansion in workforce during WW2 to keep pace with wartime spending, to its modern focus on program evaluation, cost-savings recommendations and legal involvement in impoundment and appropriations disputes, the agency has continuously evolved alongside changes in the rest of the government. In addition, developing this paper has significantly strengthened my familiarity and understanding of the breadth and utility of the congressional records system as a resource for understanding the impacts of various legislation, their interrelationship with other laws, and their progress of passage from introduction to presidential signature. Without it, the task of identifying and understanding the legislation most relevant to GAO's functions would have been a much more daunting challenge. Moving forward in both my studies and professional life, I will continue to leverage this knowledge of the contours of the budget process and the GAO's impact specifically, making sure to track how the agency repositions itself under the direction of its next Inspector General and stay informed on the valuable research it produces on efficiency and effectiveness throughout the federal landscape.

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