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Congressional Commissions: Costs and Cost-Saving Strategies

Overview

Congressional commissions are temporary advisory bodies, usually established by statute, that provide independent advice to Congress, make recommendations for changes in public policy, study or investigate a particular problem or event, or perform a specific duty.

Commission costs vary widely. Commemorative congressional commissions, such as the Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission proposed in the 110th Congress, are often authorized annual funding of several hundred thousand dollars. Commissions that examine specific public policy topics and report to Congress, such as the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, are typically authorized greater amounts of money. The cost of commissions proposed during the 112th and 113th Congress ranged from several hundred thousand dollars to $8 million.

Overall expenses for an individual commission are dependent on a variety of factors, the most important of which are the number of paid staff and the commissions' duration and scope. Many commissions have few or no full-time staff; others employ large numbers, such as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission), which had a full-time staff of 80. Additionally, some commissions provide compensation to members; others only reimburse members for travel expenses. Many commissions finish their work and terminate within a year of creation; in other cases work may not be completed for several years.

Secondary factors that can affect commission costs include the number of commissioners, how often the commission meets or holds hearings, and the number and size of publications the commission produces. Although congressional commissions are primarily funded through congressional appropriations, many commissions are statutorily authorized to accept monetary donations and volunteer labor, which may offset some costs. Occasionally, commemorative commissions are not provided any appropriated funds.

Costs of Specific Commissions

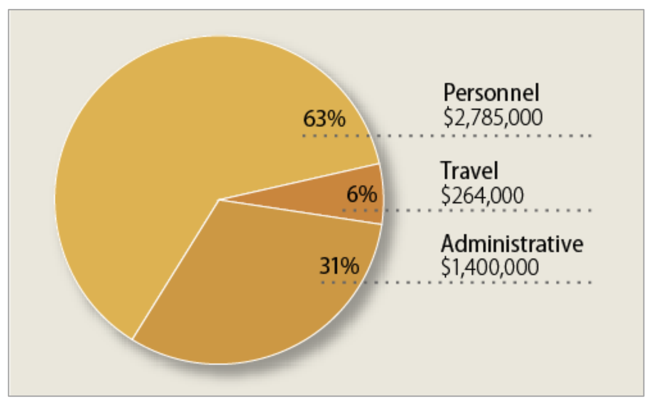
The following provides summaries of the costs and staff of three recent commissions.

The Antitrust Modernization Commission

The Antitrust Modernization Commission was established by P.L. 107-273 on November 2, 2002. The statute established a 12-member commission and directed the commission to complete its work in three years. The commission was authorized to hire a staff and commissioners, who were paid at the daily equivalent of Level IV of the executive schedule.

The commission completed its work and officially terminated on May 31, 2007. The commission held a total of 16 meetings and issued one report. Total commission costs were $4,445,000. According to the Federal Advisory Committee Database, 6% of the total cost ($264,000) was spent on travel costs and 62% ($2,785,000) was spent on staff and member costs. The remaining expenditures (32%, or $1,400,000) were for "other costs," which included "all administrative costs not attributable either to personnel payments or to travel and per diem ... [and] may include the costs of meeting rooms, transcripts, maintenance of a committee web site, etc." (See **Figure 1**). The commission employed an annual average of seven FTEs.

Figure 1. Antitrust Modernization Commission Costs



Source: Federal Advisory Committee Database

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States was established by P.L. 107-306 on November 22, 2002. The statute established a 10-member commission and directed the commission to complete its work in 18 months. The commission was authorized to hire a staff, who were paid at a rate not greater than Level V of the executive schedule.

The commission completed its work and officially terminated on September 20, 2004. The commission held a total of 12 public hearings and issued one report. The commission received $14,000,000 in appropriations and employed 80 full-time-equivalents (FTEs).

National Gambling Impact Study Commission

The National Gambling Impact Study Commission was established by public law on October 22, 1994. The statute established a nine-member commission and directed the commission to complete its work within two years of its first meeting. The commission was authorized to hire a staff at a rate not greater than Level V of the Executive Schedule. Commissioners, who were not federal employees, were authorized to be compensated at daily equivalent of Level IV of the executive schedule.

The commission completed its work and officially terminated on approximately August 1, 1999. The commission held a total of 17 meetings and issued one report. The commission was appropriated a total of $5,000,000 in FY1997 and FY1998. The commission employed 10 staff members.

Cost-Saving Strategies

Reducing Compensation for Members

Commissions that compensate members typically do so at a rate equal to the daily equivalent of the annual rate of basic pay prescribed for Level IV of the Executive Schedule ($157,100 in 2014). By reducing or eliminating costs associated with member compensation, the overall cost of a commission can be lowered. It could be argued that reducing or eliminating member compensation is the most practical option for reducing overall commission costs, since many commissions do not compensate members.

It could be argued that the use of volunteer members factors into Congress's favorable consideration of these commissions. But that might not be appropriate as a legislative strategy for all commissions. On the one hand, reporting lower personnel costs may increase chances for consideration and passage of legislation creating a commission. On the other, without compensation for members, it may be difficult to attract the qualified individuals necessary to achieve a commission's mandate.

Reducing Compensation for Staff

Similar to reducing member compensation, reducing staff compensation can arguably result in significant cost savings. Most statutes creating congressional commissions authorize the commission chair or the chair-appointed staff director to fix the rate of staff compensation, with the proviso that the rate does not exceed a specified amount. Typically, the amount specified is either Level IV or Level V of the Executive Schedule ($157,100 and $147,200 annually, respectively), although some commissions are authorized lower maximum rates for staff compensation.

While reduced staff compensation could result in cost savings, it may make it more difficult to hire qualified staff; and it could negatively impact the commission's ability to efficiently function, resulting in a lower quality work product or an increase in time needed to complete the commission's mission.

Reducing the Size of a Commission

Two options for reducing costs without adjusting the compensation of members or staff are to reduce the number of members to be appointed or reduce the authorized size of the commission's staff. It could be argued that reducing the size of a commission—for example, from 24 members to 15 members—could provide cost savings without adverse effects on the quality of the commission's work or the ability to locate qualified individuals to serve as commissioners. However, if a commission is too small, a full range of viewpoints may not be represented, which could negatively affect the commission's work products. Similarly, reducing the size of the staff could adversely affect the quality of the commission's work, or its ability to complete its work in a timely manner.

Shortening the Statutory Lifespan

Limiting the time available to a commission for the completion of its duties is another option for reducing commission costs without decreasing member or staff compensation, and without reducing the number of commissioners or size of staff. Many commissions are given several years to complete their work, and it could be argued that a shorter amount of time would not negatively affect the quality of the commission's work. In some cases, a shorter commission lifespan might also result in a larger pool of potential commissioners, because of the reduced commitment of time.

Shortening the lifespan of a commission, however, raises some concerns. If a commission is not given enough time to fulfill its duties, the final work product may suffer. Alternately, the commission could request more time to complete its work, potentially incurring more costs and negating any savings originally achieved.

Limiting the Mission or Duties

If cost-saving strategies that reduce the operational costs of a commission are unattractive, legislators might consider altering the commission's mission or duties. By limiting the commission's mission or reducing its scope of duties, costs associated with meetings, hearings, and other commission activities could be reduced. Similarly, limiting the mission or duties of a commission might make it possible to reduce operational expenses without negatively affecting the quality of the work. However, this strategy might not increase the chances of favorable consideration; altering a proposed commission to attract legislative support may alienate members of its current coalition of support.

For more information, see CRS Report R40076, *Congressional Commissions: Overview, Structure, and Legislative Considerations*, by Matthew E. Glassman and Jacob R. Straus.

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