

Wisconsin joins push for balanced budget amendment

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Wisconsin today became the 28th state to call for a constitutional convention to propose a balanced budget amendment, leaving the push six short of the states needed to open up the process of changing the U.S. Constitution.

The resolutions and bill calling for the convention and laying out rules for Wisconsin delegates passed 19-14 with Senate President Roger Roth, R-Appleton, joining Dems in opposing the effort. It has already cleared the Assembly and does not require Gov. Scott Walker's signature.

Backers have argued the amendment is needed to rein in government spending to save the country from financial ruin.

But Dems warned Republicans were opening a Pandora's Box despite GOP assurances a constitutional convention would be limited to the balanced budget proposal. What's more, with full control of Congress and the White House, Republicans could balance the federal budget anytime they wanted to, Dems argued.

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Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Middleton, also warned of opening up the Constitution to change amid an increasingly hostile national environment.

He warned there are those in the country who "don't understand certain religions are not terrorist groups," that minorities are not here to take over the country and reporters should not be punished just for reporting the facts.

"Do you want to leave the fate of our country in the hands of people on both sides right now who are more full of rage than they are of acceptance," Erpenbach said.

Sen. David Craig, R-Big Bend and one of the co-authors of the effort, said Dems were engaged in misleading rhetoric while failing to admit the country has a tremendous debt problem.

He disputed the notion that those sent to a convention would propose some of the wild ideas that Dems had suggested targeting others. Still, he said a safeguard against amendments is that they would have to garner the support of three-fourths of the states before being added to the Constitution, saying that would not happen.

“I know that one idea that could garner support of 38 states, three-quarters of the states, is a balanced budget amendment,” Craig said.

The Constitution allows amendments either through Congress passing one and sending it to the states or 34 states requesting Congress call a convention of the states. Under both scenarios, the amendment has to be ratified by 38 states before it can take effect.

The GOP push for a convention includes AB 165, which would prohibit state delegates from considering any amendment outside the call of the convention to add the balanced budget requirement. That bill, which was approved 19-14, also lays out a process to remove delegates who ignore the restrictions.

But Dems said the resolutions and bill do not override the U.S. Constitution, which they said does not limit the issues that could be considered once a constitutional convention were convened. It also calls for the Assembly speaker and Senate president each appoint three members of their chambers as delegates while the gov would appoint select one member of each chamber. The minority leader in both houses also get a pick. Under the bill, Republicans currently would appoint seven of the nine delegates.

The Speaker of the Assembly must appoint three members of the Assembly as delegates and two members of the Assembly as alternate delegates. The President of the Senate must appoint three members of the Senate as delegates and two members of the Senate as alternate delegates. The Governor must appoint one member of either the Assembly or Senate as a delegate and one member of either the Assembly or Senate as an alternate delegate.