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**The Budget-Cutting Tool Every State Should Have Handy**

Six states don't give their governors line-item veto power. It's an imperfect tool, but it's the easiest way to start getting spending under control.

BY [CHARLES CHIEPPO](http://www.governing.com/authors/Charles-Chieppo.html) | MAY 2, 2016

The recovery from the Great Recession has largely been a half-hearted one, and few see the economy improving dramatically in the near future. These realities present challenges for state and local governments that will likely require a range of responses, but giving governors the line-item veto should be seen as low-hanging fruit for the six states that don't have it.

Those states are Indiana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Vermont, and there is a movement afoot in at least one of them to do something about it. Three bills pending in the Rhode Island legislature would put the issue before the Ocean State's voters this November. Former gubernatorial candidate Ken Block, founder of the state's Moderate Party, has created a website, [lineitemveto.org](http://lineitemveto.org/), that has gathered more 900 signatures for a letter urging the state's leaders to support the change.

There's good reason to consider the idea. The long-term fiscal forecast is far from rosy for states and their local governments. A decade ago, the concern was rising health-care costs. Then came a number of municipal bankruptcies fueled in part by the costs of long-underfunded pension systems. Next came a rule from the Government Accounting Standards Board that required governments to report liabilities associated with post-employment benefits such as retiree health care. More recently, the focus has been on the need for costly improvements to infrastructure at a time when the sluggish recovery has produced slow revenue growth.

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It's not as though the line-item veto, which allows governors to delete items or parts of items in an appropriations bill without rejecting it entirely, will solve these problems for the six states that don't allow it -- after all, plenty of states that *do* have it struggle with their finances -- but it's one of the tools that will be needed if governments are to survive the fiscal challenges to come.

Like most things in politics, the full impact of the tool can't be measured in dollars and cents. The threat of the line-item veto can shape debates and make it harder for legislators to lard up popular bills with pork. A line-item veto could be overridden by lawmakers, but not without shining a light on provisions they might not want the public to pay a lot of attention to.

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The temptation for public officials to duck responsibility for dealing with hard problems and let successors wrestle with them is always going to be great. But state and local leaders who want to deal with problems now face difficult choices. One approach, of course, would be to raise taxes, but voters are rarely happy about that. Another would be for governments to retreat entirely from some areas they now fund. One could make a realistic argument that the public sector does a number of unnecessary things, but the inconvenient truth is that in a democracy every one of them has a constituency.

In most states, the far more realistic approach will be a combination of raising revenues and finding savings. The line-item veto may be an imperfect tool for accomplishing the latter, but it's one that all states ought to have at hand.

