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I applaud the House Budget Committee for its legislation allowing CBO more access to data from federal agencies. I urge the House to pass the bill in time for the Senate to act expeditiously as well.

Having once served as Director, I can report first-hand that agencies collect data valuable to CBO analysis of legislation and important issues to the Congress. Unfortunately, many of those agencies are reluctant to share the data for any number of reasons, including:

- privacy;
- enabling statutes; and,
- the inherent power of “owning” the data (often unspoken).

The bill the House plans to consider will help clarify the ability of agencies to overcome any legislative restrictions that might impose concern about the legality of transfers. Other concerns can be mitigated using an MOU.

Privacy has often been the reason given for not sharing data. Various deidentification techniques can protect privacy. I was often told that I could identify Bill Gates tax return without any identifying information...of course, with more taxpayers at his level of income, it would be more difficult now. Nonetheless, it is possible to eliminate entirely a few cells that would be identifiable without severe masking of all data, destroying the statistical properties of the information.

With the help of Chairman Moynihan, CBO gained access to IRS data, but under all the same laws and rules of the IRS itself...including go-to-jail provisions for leaking. Some analysts at CBO were initially chagrined at the new exposure, but subsequently understood the security measures we needed to take to successfully comply. This legislation would do the same for all agencies.

The Census Bureau often claimed that its charter made any census data available only to the Census Bureau...to help improve its data collection. I once encouraged the House Appropriations Committee to include CBO access to Census Bureau data, which they did, only to have the Bureau launch a large and successful campaign against it. The Bureau claimed leaks by CBO would discourage people from returning the census survey when, at least at that point, the only agency to leak data was the Bureau itself. This bill would make it clear that it is appropriate and legal for agencies to allow CBO to use data collected by the government.

No matter what the reason, nor how good the motives, withholding data from CBO deprives the Congress of better estimates and analysis. This legislation will make it more straightforward and less ambiguous, without jeopardizing existing privacy. The folks at CBO, along with other fine qualities, are not a leaky lot...as shown by their history.