

What Motivates the Freedom Caucus? re: Washington Politics

Article By:

Gabe Neville

Bill Wichterman

The current turmoil in the ***House of Representatives*** is the culmination of a dispute that has been festering in ***Congress*** since the Class of 2010 was elected. That was the year of the “tea party” wave and the backlash against the ***Affordable Care Act***. However, to fully understand it requires a look back to the last Democratic Congressional majority.

The Democrats took control of Congress back in 2006, and took even bigger majorities (and the White House) in 2008. Then, on July 7, 2009, Al Franken was seated in the Senate after an extended post-election legal contest. He became the 60th Democratic vote, creating a rare filibuster-proof majority. This, combined with a large majority in the House and Barack Obama in the White House, made a number of otherwise unlikely left-of-center legislative initiatives suddenly viable.

To understand how unique a circumstance that was, one has only to note that never in American history has the Republican Party had a filibuster-proof Senate majority. The supermajority was mostly theoretical for a time because of the illness of Senator Edward Kennedy (but real when his appointed successor, Paul Kirk, served for fourteen weeks).

The most controversial piece of legislation advanced during this period was the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The backlash not only ended the Democrats’ Senate supermajority (when Republican Scott Brown won the special election to replace Kennedy), it also produced the largest Republican Congressional majority in many decades. Republicans netted 63 seats, a historic victory by any measure. Many of the members elected that year are organized today, with a few allies, as the “Freedom Caucus.”

Many Republicans ran that year promising to fight the Washington establishment, repeal the Affordable Care Act, reform entitlements, and balance the federal budget. Today, those members and their allies are increasingly frustrated at their inability to accomplish the goals they campaigned on, despite majorities in the House and Senate. They are cognizant of the filibuster and the veto, which stand in their way, but they believe the weapons in their own arsenal should make the contest at least an even match. Many of them are pressing their Senate counterparts to go “nuclear” and

eliminate the legislative filibuster, as Senator Reid eliminated it for non-Supreme Court judicial nominees. Above all, they believe Congress has the power of the purse—and they want to use it.

There is nothing disingenuous about the Freedom Caucus. They firmly believe in the power of their ideas and the rectitude of their views. They want Republican leaders who will fight strenuously for those ideas before even contemplating compromise. They believe the fight itself will highlight their issues and educate the public, winning people over in the process. It is for that reason that they are infuriated by legislative chess players who look three steps forward on the board and say, “We can’t make that move; it will put us in checkmate.”

Checkmate, for Members like John Boehner who remember 1995, is a government shutdown. Freedom Caucus Members find that thinking wrong-headed and even cowardly. They dream of Republican leaders who are articulate and courageous enough to fight valiantly and persuasively for conservative ideas, using each showdown as an opportunity to educate and persuade the public.

There is now a profound mistrust between Republican leadership and the Freedom Caucus (and their respective outside allies). The Freedom Caucus’s critics believe a group of 40 or 50 members should not be allowed to be the tail that wags the dog. They are a minority in the Republican Conference and a fairly small minority in the House of Representatives. Many Republican pragmatists believe that Freedom Caucus members (and groups like Heritage Action and the Club for Growth) see political and monetary benefit in promoting themselves as true conservatives at the expense of their colleagues. The Freedom Caucus believes the Leadership pays only lip-service to conservative ideals and is content to lose battles to keep the machinery of power humming.

The pragmatists believe the Freedom Caucus is playing with fire: damaging the party’s brand and endangering the Republicans’ majority. The Freedom Caucus believes the majority isn’t worth keeping if it isn’t going to be used to accomplish the things they came to Washington to do.

The current turmoil in the House Republican Conference is a direct result of these two conflicting worldviews. Speaker Boehner’s retirement announcement seemed, for a few days, to be the culmination of this conflict. Many Republicans hoped that Kevin McCarthy, the cheerful heir apparent, would have a fresh start and find new ways to unite the Republican team. Now, it seems clear that Boehner’s announcement was merely a prologue. Today, it appears there is no willing Republican who can successfully unite the Conference and become Speaker. A cable news commentator said on Thursday that “no sentient mammal” would want the job.

The latest reports are that Republicans’ efforts to draft Paul Ryan may be working. One way or another, there will ultimately be a new Speaker. It appears, however, that long-festering arguments among Republicans will now, at long last, have to be dealt with. That could be a very good thing for the GOP. The jury is still out as to whether it will be.