

US House Speaker John Boehner announces resignation

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In a sign of mounting political crisis in Washington, House Speaker John Boehner, the third-ranking official in the federal government and the top Republican, announced his resignation Friday. Boehner will step down as speaker and resign his seat in the House of Representatives, from the 8th Congressional District of Ohio, effective October 30.

Both the timing of the announcement and the delay in leaving office point to the reasons for Boehner's departure, which are linked to divisions within the Republican Party magnified by the impending deadline for approving the federal budget, September 30, the end of the current fiscal year.

In past years, Congress has approved a so-called continuing resolution to keep the federal government funded while budget talks continued between the Democrats and Republicans, Congress and the White House.

In agreement with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican from Kentucky), Boehner has rebuffed demands from an ultra-right faction of congressional Republicans to precipitate a crisis over the budget deadline for the purpose of forcing an end to federal funding of Planned Parenthood, which provides health services, including abortion, to millions of women.

The health care organization has been the target of an ultra-right smear campaign for the past several months, utilizing doctored videos produced by an anti-abortion group that sent people undercover posing as representatives of a biotech company seeking to buy fetal body parts.

At least 31 Republican members of the House of Representatives signed a pledge to oppose any bill to fund the federal government after September 30 if it includes money for Planned Parenthood. In effect, they

would force a federal shutdown, similar to that which occurred in 2013 and was enormously unpopular, with many government services closed and workers either furloughed or compelled to work without paychecks.

Many members of this ultra-right faction are also supporting a resolution to declare Boehner's position as speaker vacant. The resolution, filed in July by North Carolina representative Mark Meadows, is a parliamentary motion to force a new vote for speaker, which could be brought up at any time for consideration.

Given the 247-188 division in the House, the defection of even 30 Republicans would allow the Democratic minority to determine the outcome of the vote. They could keep Boehner in office by voting for him or abstaining, or join with the ultra-right faction to oust him.

In a statement issued along with his resignation, Boehner indicated that he had planned to hold the office of speaker only until the end of 2014, but changed his mind after his likely successor, Majority Leader Eric Cantor, was defeated in a Republican primary by an anti-immigration activist.

"I stayed on to provide continuity to the Republican Conference and the House," he wrote. "It is my view, however, that prolonged leadership turmoil would do irreparable damage to the institution. To that end, I will resign the Speakership and my seat in Congress on October 30."

Representatives close to Boehner have declared that he did not want to retain office by relying on Democratic votes and decided to resign instead, giving himself a final month in office to push through the continuing resolution. This would set the stage for another bipartisan deal with the Obama administration on further spending cuts and right-wing policy

measures, but would be unlikely to include any curbs on Planned Parenthood.

The Senate has already moved towards such action. On Thursday, it voted by 47-52 to block a continuing resolution that would have barred funding for Planned Parenthood, as demanded by most Republicans. Eight Republicans joined all but one Democrat, and the motion fell 13 short of the 60 votes required to end debate.

McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, then scheduled a vote Monday on a continuing resolution to extend funding until December 11 for all federal programs, including those involving Planned Parenthood. This is expected to pass with bipartisan support. The measure would then go to the House for action by the Thursday deadline.

There are several factors underlying Boehner's ouster as speaker. Most obvious is the continued shift to the right in the Republican Party. Boehner was first elected to Congress in 1990 and was identified with the hard-right faction that came to power in 1994 under Newt Gingrich, although the two later had a falling out.

He was elected leader of the defeated minority of House Republicans after the Democratic election victory in 2006 and became speaker after the Republican sweep in the 2010 elections. He was repeatedly attacked by ultra-right Tea Party elements in his caucus because his bipartisan deals with the Obama administration failed to fully satisfy their demands for the complete dismantling of federal social programs and abolition of all taxes on the rich.

These tensions came to a head over the demand by the ultra-right minority, appealing to Christian fundamentalists and right-wing Catholics, to provoke a federal budget crisis over Planned Parenthood.

There has been enormous pressure, both from Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, against a new round of politically-driven budget showdowns in Washington. Given the instability in financial markets and the eruption of foreign policy crises in Asia, Europe and throughout the Middle East, even a token federal shutdown of the type that took place in 2013 is considered potentially destabilizing.

Boehner apparently made a last-ditch effort to satisfy the ultra-right minority, meeting with a group of them after the Pope's address to the joint session of Congress Thursday. They refused to accept an

alternative procedure for defunding Planned Parenthood, insisting on using the federal budget deadline. The next morning, Boehner resigned.

The likely successor to Boehner, the current House Republican majority leader Kevin McCarthy, would represent a further shift to the right in the Republican leadership. Even more significant will be the contests for other leadership posts opened up by McCarthy's elevation, which are expected to reveal deeper rifts within the Republican caucus, paralleling the crisis in the campaign for the party's presidential nomination.

Boehner and McConnell have been frequent targets of attack and derision on the part of many of the Republican presidential hopefuls, including the frontrunner, billionaire Donald Trump, Senator Ted Cruz and a half dozen others on the grounds of their supposed failure to push the Obama administration sufficiently far to the right.



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