

Republican ultra-right faction backs Ryan as US House leader

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The events of last week have confirmed the inordinate power of an ultra-right-wing minority on Republicans in the US House of Representatives, as Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin became the consensus choice for the top leadership position following his endorsement by the House Freedom Caucus.

Ryan will be formally approved October 28 as the nominee of the Republican majority for Speaker of the House, which will put him in control of the flow of legislation and give him the final say on most decisions involving legislative process.

The Speaker also represents the House in negotiations on the most important issues with the Senate and White House. In this regard, it is significant that Ryan has worked closely with the Obama administration on a number of issues in recent months, including passage of the Trans Pacific Partnership earlier this year.

The actual vote by the full House will take place October 29, one day before the scheduled retirement of outgoing speaker John Boehner. It was Boehner's resignation last month, largely as a result of pressure from the House Freedom Caucus, that brought the political crisis in the Republican Party to a head.

Plans for an orderly succession to Boehner, with the number two House Republican, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, moving up to replace him, were disrupted by McCarthy himself.

In an effort to defend himself from the same ultra-right attacks that brought down Boehner, McCarthy pointed to the work of the House Select Committee on the terrorist attack that killed four Americans in Benghazi, Libya in 2012, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

This committee, established by Boehner and McCarthy in 2014, had succeeded in driving down

Hillary Clinton's poll numbers, he declared with satisfaction. This too-open admission that the real purpose of the Benghazi committee was to hurt the likely Democratic presidential nominee in 2016 damaged McCarthy instead. Two days later, faced with redoubled opposition from the House Freedom Caucus and wider dissatisfaction in the Republican ranks, McCarthy withdrew as a candidate for Speaker.

That left Paul Ryan, chairman of the main tax-writing panel, the House Ways and Means Committee, well-known nationally as the vice-presidential running mate for Mitt Romney in the 2012 elections. Ryan rose to prominence as one of the most right-wing advocates of the destruction of Medicare and other federal social programs during his tenure as chairman of the House Budget Committee (2011-2014).

Even this record, however, was insufficient for the ultra-right group, which demanded concessions on House rules that would give their faction more influence over legislation.

The Freedom Caucus comprises about 40 of the most hard-line Republican members of the House, a mix of Christian fundamentalists, libertarians and semi-fascists. Their views on policy differ little from those of Ryan, McCarthy or Boehner: all are arch-reactionaries. The differences are over tactics, with the Freedom Caucus taking the view that the Republican majority in Congress should impose its policies on the Obama administration by cutting off funding and forcing a partial shutdown of the federal government or a federal default on debt payments.

Ryan & Co. oppose such methods out of concern for the damage that would be done to the Wall Street financial interests that ultimately determine the actions of both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Two factors give the House Freedom Caucus power

far beyond its numbers. The most important is the political dynamic at work. The entire official US political structure has been moving steadily to the right over the past 40 years. At every stage in that process, right-wing minorities in the Republican Party have paved the way for the political establishment as a whole. The policies espoused by the Freedom Caucus will become the agenda of both the Republicans and Democrats in the not-too-distant future.

There is an additional, structural factor involved in this year's crisis. The Speaker of the House, unlike party leadership positions, is elected by the entire House. Since the 188 Democrats will vote for Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, the Republicans must supply all 218 votes required for a majority. With a caucus of 247, the defection of just 30 Republicans would block the election of the Republican nominee for Speaker.

In January, a dozen members of the Freedom Caucus refused to vote for Boehner, leaving him with only a narrow majority. In July, Representative Mark Meadows, a member of the Freedom Caucus, filed a parliamentary motion to declare the speakership vacant, which under current House rules has priority over any legislation. He can force a vote, effectively a new election for speaker, on two days' notice. Boehner operated for two months under this threat, knowing that the Freedom Caucus had enough votes to defeat him, before deciding to step down.

When Ryan announced his decision last week to seek the speakership, he made his candidacy conditional on support from the three main caucuses among the House Republicans: the Freedom Caucus; the Republican Study Group, comprising nearly 150 representatives; and the Tuesday Group, a small caucus of less conservative representatives from marginal districts.

While Ryan presented this as a demand on the three groups—support me or I won't run—it was in effect a declaration that the Freedom Caucus has veto power over who will be speaker, because the support of the other groups was not in doubt.

Ryan followed this up by meeting first with four top leaders of the Freedom Caucus to seek their support and assurance that they would abandon the parliamentary motion to declare the speaker's chair vacant, at least for the rest of the legislative session that extends to the end of 2016. A deal was reached that

Ryan would make unspecified concessions on the legislative agenda in return for the Freedom Caucus's backing.

Two-thirds of the group then endorsed his candidacy, although about 15 representatives are expected to vote for Representative Daniel Webster of Florida.

There have been conflicting reports on the most significant concession Ryan apparently made to the Freedom Caucus, an agreement to reinstate the so-called Hastert Rule, named after the Republican speaker who preceded Pelosi and Boehner in the post.

Under this rule, the speaker agrees not to bring any legislation to the floor unless it has majority support within the Republican caucus. Boehner disregarded this procedure on several critical occasions when legislation could only be passed with a minority of Republicans joining with a near-unanimous Democratic caucus. Most recently, Boehner brought a continuing resolution to the floor in late September, funding the federal government through December 11. It passed by 277 to 151, with Democrats supporting it 186-0, while Republicans divided 91 for and 151 against.

If Ryan enforces the Hastert rule, it would make passage of a full budget resolution, as well as a measure to lift the federal debt ceiling and prevent a default on federal debt, far more difficult. Secretary of the Treasury Jacob Lew warned Congress earlier this month that the debt ceiling must be raised by November 3 to prevent a default, which would have unknown and potentially disastrous consequences on the financial markets.



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