



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on February 11, 2016

Republicans Divided in Response to Obama's Budget

"This isn't even a budget, so much as it is a progressive manual for growing the federal government at the expense of hard-working Americans," House Speaker Paul Ryan (shown, R-Wis.) said in response to the delivery of President Barack Obama's eighth and final budget to Congress.



While Ryan's characterization of the Obama proposed budget is certainly correct, how the Republicans in Congress — and leaders such as Ryan in the House and Mitch McConnell in the Senate respond — is uncertain. Ryan is urging his fellow Republicans to become the party of "proposition not opposition."

Previous House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) resigned under pressure from the more conservative Republicans in the House, especially those who call themselves "the Freedom Caucus." He was replaced by Ryan. Representative Mick Mulvaney (R-S.C.), a Freedom Caucus member, summarized the battle lines: "If we are going to pass a Republican budget, it should reflect Republican ideals. That means lower spending."

When Ryan was under consideration for the speakership, he wooed conservatives by promising to abide by the Hastert Rule (named for former Speaker Dennis Hastert). The Hastert Rule stipulated that the speaker would allow votes only on bills enjoying the support of the majority of the Republicans. But Ryan has not done so — at least so far — choosing instead to implement the governing coalition used by Boehner, in which "moderate" Republicans and Democrats joined in an uneasy coalition to pass budget bills; budget bills that send the national debt to ever-higher levels.

The fact that Ryan began working last year on the 2016 budget is encouraging to some Freedom Caucus members, since a large problem for the past several years has been the failure of the House to develop a budget early enough to vote on the various parts of that budget separately. This has led to a series of "continuing resolutions" of recent years, which in turn has led to a subtle shift in budget-making power away from Congress to a liberal president such as Obama. Obama can threaten to veto the budget if the Republicans put things in the bill he does not like, and blame the Republicans for "shutting down the government." Obama's allies in the mainstream media then ensure the public believes it is all the Republicans' fault. Many Republicans in Congress simply quake in fear of being blamed for "shutting down the government."

Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) attempted Wednesday to use the Obama budget to get votes from the more conservative members of Congress for a budget advanced by the "mainstream" Republican House leadership. They were offered the opportunity to vote against President Obama's proposed 2017 fiscal budget, but only if they would also vote for a later budget offered by Republican leadership. This provoked laughter and moans from the closed-door meeting. Representative John Fleming (R-La.) said members were "amused by the kind of bait-and-switch."



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Republican members relish the idea of telling constituents in an election year that they “stood up” to Obama and voted down his budget, so it is a powerful lure. Another carrot dangled in front of the Republican caucus is that they would, in the future, be able to use the budget reconciliation process to circumvent the Senate’s 60-vote threshold to pass legislation. (In the Senate, the threat of a filibuster by the Democrats, who are in the minority, but have enough members to sustain a filibuster and resist a cloture vote, which requires 60 votes to close debate, has enabled the Democrats to frustrate Republican efforts on budget bills the past few years).

One of the problems faced in the Republican caucus is the battle between “budget hawks” and “defense hawks.” Budget hawks are Republicans who simply want to cut spending, across the board. Defense hawks generally are in agreement with cutting domestic spending, but are staunch advocates of increased military spending. In order to get Democrat votes for increased defense appropriations, these Republicans tend to cut deals with the Democrats and go along with social spending favored by the Democrats. Thus, federal spending continues to rise, year after year.

Republican leadership — Ryan now, and Boehner before him — tends to argue that in a “divided government” situation, with the president wielding the veto pen, there is only so much Republicans can do. This argument is beginning to wear thin with members of the Freedom Caucus and the Republican grassroots, who are generally much more conservative than Republican members of Congress. The passage of the Omnibus Budget of late last year remains a sore point for many conservatives, in and out of Congress. That budget continued full funding for Planned Parenthood, the organization revealed to having been involved in the sale of baby body parts. Sanctuary cities — localities that ignore federal immigration law and harbor illegal aliens — will continue receiving federal funds uninterrupted. Visas for foreign workers, which lead to the displacement of American workers, received an increase in funding. Democrats won extensions for tax credits for solar and wind production. Efforts to block Obama’s executive actions on immigration were not included in the bill.

Ryan is wooing conservative members of the House, no doubt noting the fall of John Boehner last year. He has included many of Boehner’s opponents in weekly informal meetings, and seeks the advice of these more conservative members on major legislative issues. He has turned over more authority to the chairmen of committees.

In a speech to Heritage Action, a policy group that was at odds with Boehner and has continued to have an adversarial relationship with Ryan, Ryan asked them to not use votes on appropriations amendments as a way of rating members’ conservatism. “It’s setting our sites too low,” he told them.

A budget committee vote is expected by the end of February, and a full House vote by early March. The goal is to have more time to work on 12 separate bills before the end of the year.

Hopefully, some constructive action toward reducing federal spending and the national debt will happen this year. Voters who gave the Republicans control of the House in 2010 and control of the Senate in 2014 expected a great deal more action than has occurred so far.

Photo: AP Images

Steve Byas is a professor of history at Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College in Moore, Oklahoma. His book, History’s Greatest Libels, is his challenge to some of the great lies of history against such historical figures as George Washington, James K. Polk, Warren Harding, Joseph McCarthy, and Clarence Thomas.



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