

Hill's GOP Freshmen Poised for Historic Impact

Political Realities, Fiscal Choices May Slow Momentum of Hard-Charging Class of '94

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When she landed in Congress at the start of this year on a personal crusade to dismantle large chunks of the federal government, Rep. Linda A. Smith (R-Wash.) had one overriding fear.

"I was afraid I'd get swallowed up in an institution where people quibbled all the time and very little got accomplished," said Smith, who started in politics organizing grass-roots anti-tax initiatives. "I didn't want to become part of the gridlock."

Half a year later, if anything is at risk of

being swallowed by anyone, it's the federal government by Smith and her 83 fellow Republican first-termers.

Whether their target has been spending, taxes, Cabinet departments, federal regulations, congressional committees or the seniority system, the 73 GOP first-termers in the House and the 11 in the Senate have brought the angry anti-government populism of their constituents with them to Washington, where they've scrambled the power lines of Congress and the policy agenda of the nation.

Most of their agenda has sprung from the House, the new home to what one wag

has called "73 Mr. Smiths," after the Jimmy Stewart character who goes to Washington to clean up the mess. In time, much of the agenda may be scaled back, or blocked entirely, by the moderating instincts of the Senate, the White House and perhaps even the House GOP freshmen themselves, who have begun to discover that cutting programs that could affect their districts is dicier than approving a plan for a balanced budget.

But for now the impact of the congressional Class of 1994 rivals that of two other large freshmen classes of modern times:

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the Democratic Class of 1974 that was elected in the wake of Richard M. Nixon's resignation and the Republican Class of 1980 that rode Ronald Reagan's coattails to control of the Senate.

The 1974 "Watergate baby" class of 75 House Democratic freshmen fought with its congressional elders from the outset and wound up firing most of its bullets on institutional reform. Its chief legacies are means-not-ends measures: the Congressional Budget Act and the Campaign Finance Reform Act. The 1980 Senate class of 16 Republican freshmen was overwhelmed by the more moderate and politically adept senior GOP leaders and got blown away by the Democrats when its members came up for reelection in 1986.

The 65 freshmen Democrats elected in the climate of political change that brought Bill Clinton to the White House in 1992 had trouble formulating an agenda of their own but provided votes to pass a backlog of Democratic legislation that had stalled under GOP presidents.

The Class of '94, in the view of some congressional scholars, has the chance to do much more than its predecessors. "This is the Reagan Revolution come home to roost in Congress. The difference between controlling the agenda from Congress and controlling it from the White House is like the difference between a consistent singles hitter and a guy with a home-run swing who strikes out a lot," said David Mason, a congressional specialist at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think

tank. "This class can have a huge impact—bit by bit, bill by bill."

In the House, the freshmen have had an outsized impact largely because of their alliance with Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who recruited many of them, provided key funding for their campaigns and rewarded the winners with choice committee assignments.

In return, they have voted with him more than 90 percent of the time, providing the critical mass of votes and ideological energy to approve their "Contract With America" bills, and then to push through the House-Senate budget resolution in their—and Gingrich's—image.

In the Senate, there are proportionately fewer freshmen than in the House, and Senate freshmen face rules—and a power structure of politically moderate committee chairmen—that are more difficult to influence. Democrats readily use the filibuster to block what they describe as "extreme" Republican initiatives, and GOP leaders must cut deals with Democrats to get the 60 votes necessary to force bills to passage, often to the annoyance of uncompromising freshmen.

Senate Republican freshmen also have been unable to keep their colleagues from filing a lot of the sharp edges off of House GOP initiatives. In addition to killing the balanced budget constitutional amendment, the Senate scaled back one anti-regulatory measure and is considering watering down another. It flinched from going as far as the House did in curbing civil litigation and had to delay action on welfare reform because of Republican divi-

sions. House-Senate compromises are proving difficult to achieve.

Still, the freshmen also have shaken things up in the Senate. "It's far too early to tell what the impact will be, but the dynamism they've injected into the system is probably their most notable achievement," said Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine). "There's a real sense of mission. . . . They want to change the status quo, break out of the mold."

They also have given conservatives a solid margin of control over the Senate GOP caucus. With the exception of a conservative who replaced a conservative in Wyoming, "every single freshman is more conservative than the senators they replaced," observed Sen. Robert F. Bennett (R-Utah). "Moving the Senate that much to the right has had an enormous impact, even if they had done nothing else."

In the first week of the session the 11 GOP Senate freshmen—six of whom came directly from the House, where they'd forged a group identity as members of a "persecuted minority"—put Sen. Trent Lott (Miss.) over the top in unseating Sen. Alan K. Simpson (Wyo.) by 27 to 26 in the race for Republican whip. Lott is a House veteran with close ties to Gingrich; Simpson was the choice of Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.).

More recently, they provided the muscle behind efforts to force more party discipline and curb the independence of committee chairmen, which stemmed from a furor when Appropriations Committee Chairman Mark O. Hatfield (Ore.) cast the sole GOP vote against the balanced budget amendment.

The House freshmen have reached for far more. They have led the charge to cut congressional committee staffs by a third, impose term limits on committee chairmen (now being considered by Senate Republicans), scale back government regulation and eliminate four Cabinet departments—Commerce, Energy, Education, and Housing and Urban Development.

"If they wind up eliminating just one Cabinet department, they will have done something that has never been done before—reverse the steady institutional growth of the federal government," said Mason, who helped organize an orientation program for the freshmen last December.

Beyond their numbers and partisan tilt (there are just 13 Democratic freshmen in the House; none in the Senate), the most distinctive feature of the House GOP freshmen is that they see themselves as short-timers.

While the new senators are mostly veteran politicians, the new House members are self-styled citizen-legislators; political embodiments of the term limits era. Few have gone to the lengths of Rep. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.)—who sleeps on a futon in his office to remind himself that his sojourn here is temporary—but he's the right class mascot for the House.

"We don't look to politics as a career path," said Rep. Enid Waldholtz (R-Utah), a corporate lawyer. "It gives us a real focus about getting things done in a hurry, and a real willingness to take some risks." Waldholtz, however, is not exactly new to politics. She unsuccessfully ran for the House in 1992, she was deputy chief of staff to Utah's governor and a national chairman of the Young Republicans.

They also developed an unusually strong sense of class

cohesion. Mason recalled that "at orientation, one of the freshmen said to me: 'There are only three or four among us with a pro-government bias, and we know who they are.'"

One may be Rep. Ray LaHood (R-Ill.), former chief of staff to former House minority leader Robert H. Michel, and one of the few freshmen to have spent time in a legislative chamber. It seems to have counted against him. "I was one of the few freshmen who didn't sign the contract, and I think that made the others sort of look askance at me," said LaHood, who tried but failed to get a seat on the Appropriations Committee.

According to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the typical House GOP freshman voted with the leadership 96.6 percent of the time on 302 votes during the first 100 days. Democrats have branded them "Newt's Ninnies." But if anything, House freshmen say, Gingrich has had to strain to keep up with them. According to a tally by the National Taxpayers Union of spend-

ing votes cast during the first 100 days, the typical freshman supported 40 percent more in cuts than the typical non-freshman.

The real test of the mettle of this class will come later in the session, as Congress moves beyond the abstract process of crunching numbers and starts the painful process of cutting programs. "This is their high-water mark," said House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.). "Now they have to make it [the budget] a reality, and they're really going to find out what's hard."

"As we get into the appropriations bills, there's no question that the class voting patterns are going to be more normal and less cohesive," said Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), president of the House GOP freshman class. "Representatives from farm states—me included—are already battling to save commodity programs. I don't think they should be cut so deeply." Similarly, votes on the military construction bill earlier this month saw the class divided between defense hawks who wanted more spending and deficit hawks who wanted less.

"We're going to have a healthy civic experiment over the next few years," said Peter Wehner of Empower America, a conservative advocacy group. "These freshmen are going to have to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. Sure, some will give in to constituent pressure, but I think most of them are ready to take the plunge. They are keenly aware of the animosity people feel toward Congress—that's how they got elected. They also know that if they don't produce as outsiders, the public will find new outsiders to replace them."

The outsider instinct has found its fullest expression in the New Federalist Group, an informal caucus organized by House GOP freshmen who are pushing for the elimination of four Cabinet agencies.

"My only surprise since coming to Washington is that I wasn't harsh enough in my anti-Washington rhetoric," said Rep. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), a cofounder of the group and one of the political heavyweights of the class. "This is a self-serving place that had become incredibly ossified."

Brownback wants not only to eliminate agencies but to cut congressional salaries and pensions—proposals for which he gets a more enthusiastic reception back home than here. He worries the Congress will not go far enough. "I think the voters' faith in government has begun to come back a little bit, but it's shaky, and they're

worried we'll stop too soon," he said.

The one area where the freshmen have shown independence from Gingrich—and from the Reagan legacy as well—involves free trade and foreign investment. In February, 11 House freshmen broke with Gingrich and joined Patrick J. Buchanan at a news conference to voice disapproval of the Clinton administration's loan guarantee plan to rescue the Mexican peso.

"On this issue the children have rebelled from the parent," said Norman Ornstein, a congressional scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "Ronald Reagan would not be comfortable with the nativist, isolationist, protectionist instincts of this class."

As a rule, these freshmen don't break lightly from Gingrich's grasp. This spring Rep. Greg Ganske (R-Iowa), a wealthy plastic surgeon, became worried about the House Republican tax plan because it would provide \$500 tax credits for families that earn up to \$200,000 a year. He thinks the threshold is too high and will cause him political grief in his middle-income, traditionally Democratic district.

Ganske took his concerns to Gingrich, who told him to circulate a letter to test how much opposition there was. Ganske got 106 signatures on his proposal to cut the threshold to \$95,000, but in the end decided to back off his challenge to the leadership.

Not all freshmen are as willing to compromise. Smith, the anti-tax activist from Washington, said she has been dismayed that the House leadership has moved proposals for congressional gift and lobby reform to the back burner—perhaps because the lobbies and the GOP leadership have forged a cozy alliance.

"You will find that with the freshmen, we don't give up," said Smith. "If the leadership continues to play games with us, then at a certain time, we may have to . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She said she didn't want to make a threat, out of respect for the House leadership.
