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GOP Freshmen Seek To Boost Their Profiles

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The conservative freshman Senators who rode into Washington as rock stars of the 2010 elections are beginning to find their comfort zone, sounding off this week after long silences on the budget, the president and even foreign policy.

For Republican rookies — such as Sens. [Rand Paul](#) (Ky.), [Mike Lee](#) (Utah), [Ron Johnson](#) (Wis.) and [Marco Rubio](#) (Fla.) — this summer's all-consuming debt ceiling debate and foreign policy controversies have opened a window that's part redux of their tea-party-inspired glory days on the trail and part awkward learning experience of the ways of a chamber that they still don't completely understand.

Freshman GOP stunts have run the gamut from Johnson's short-lived filibuster on the Senate floor Tuesday to a full-fledged campaign Wednesday on a doomed-to-fail balanced budget amendment and a freshmen-led charge to keep the Senate in session through the July Fourth recess.

The most telling part about the attention and momentum gained from Johnson's floor antics Tuesday was that it was largely unplanned. Top GOP leadership aides said they had no idea Johnson was going to stage a filibuster, and his initial objections prevented his fellow Republicans from speaking on the Democrats' failure to pass a budget. Still, GOP aides said they enjoyed Johnson's brief seizure of the floor both for its spirit and for the lesson on the limits of procedural power the Wisconsin Republican learned in its swift end. Senate Democrats easily halted Johnson's attempted filibuster with a quorum call vote.

Though none of these freshmen is under the illusion he will be principal in the ongoing budget talks to avert government default, it doesn't mean they aren't trying to influence their own party's rhetoric.

"Obviously, there's a formal process between the leader and the White House in negotiations that we're not involved in, but that floor is available to us. The amendatory process is available to us. I think you're going to see an increasing amount of assertiveness," Rubio said in a brief interview. "We're watching now as this issue unfolds that there's hardly any activity and a complete lack of [a] sense of urgency behind it."

Rubio attended a hastily called press conference Wednesday with Johnson, Paul, fellow freshman Sen. [Kelly Ayotte](#) (N.H.) and more senior Senators such as [Jeff Sessions](#) (Ala.) and [John Cornyn](#) (Texas). The group was highlighting its call for the July Fourth recess to be canceled to give Congress time to craft a budget deal, as well as hailing Johnson's floor stand as an inspiration.

GOP freshmen have been vocal in closed-door caucus meetings and at White House meetings, according to aides and Members in the room. The Conference's balanced budget amendment campaign was designed specifically to play out next week in Senators' home turfs.

Republicans believe they can use the balanced budget amendment as a rhetorical device to distinguish themselves from Democrats and tout a message of fiscal responsibility, even if it won't pass. The same can be said for the calls to cancel recess, a request often made but rarely fulfilled by lawmakers who enjoy going home.

The Republican freshmen's opportunity to speak out on these issues is in large part because of the foil presented by President Barack Obama. On Wednesday, the president took questions from the media for the first time in four months on issues such the Aug. 2 deadline to raise the debt limit, the constitutionality of military involvement in Libya and the war in Afghanistan.

GOP Senators, once energized by a wave election, have been itching for a chance to engage on precisely those issues and more.

"They were coming in at 100 miles per hour, but that has slowed down to about 5 miles per hour in a period of six months. If people want to bring wholesale change to Washington, they have to build larger majorities in the House, win a majority in the Senate, take back the White House," one GOP leadership aide said. "All of that bottled-up energy is going to explode in terms of getting activated for continuing phase two of change that Americans want."

But not every Republican on the Hill is as effusive in characterizing the role of the freshmen. Though many concede their energy has been a boon to the party, they say there's more to being a Senator than just showing up to the game.

Paul, for example, has been highly successful in getting votes on amendments he supports. But those measures rarely pass. A budget proposal he brought to the floor last month received only seven votes, and his Libya resolution garnered only 10 votes.

"It's not just getting a vote, it's building support for your position. It takes work. It takes work in this chamber with people you might not agree with. ... It's great to get a vote, but it's way better to win," another Republican aide said.

Until these Members can score actual legislative wins, they'll just have to settle for helping to drive the GOP agenda — which six months in, isn't a terrible place to be.

"Absolutely there is," Lee said about whether there's space for freshmen in this summer's biggest debates. "We have been — and are still becoming — more a part of the dialogue because we're frustrated."

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Bill Clark/Roll Call

Sen. Mike Lee is one of several new GOP Senators seeking to make a splash on issues such as the debt and foreign policy.

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