



Political Healing

An outreach campaign from Capitol Hill to grassroots Republicans.

Fred Barnes

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At long last one of the nastiest rifts in the Republican party is being dealt with. It's not the divide between conservatives and moderates. Nor does it involve who's right about how to cut taxes, supply-siders or reform conservatives. This rift is bigger. It's between Republican leaders in Congress and the Republican grassroots.

It's manifested itself in numerous ways. The drive to oust, or at least embarrass, Speaker John Boehner is one. That effort led to 25 House Republicans opposing Boehner for speaker in January. That's just a tenth of the GOP caucus—246 strong—but was enough to threaten Boehner's majority in the House since every Democrat voted against him.

Another example: the primary defeat last year of House majority leader Eric Cantor of Virginia. The victor was David Brat, an economics professor at Randolph-Macon College who'd never won elective office. Brat is now close to a loose group of 20 or so dissident House Republicans, dubbed "chuckleheads" by former Republican congressman Steve LaTourette of Ohio.

Then there's the constant refrain one hears from Republican activists around the country, particularly the Tea Party ones. They're often as critical of Boehner and Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell as they are of President Obama. Or so it seems. Conservative talk radio amplifies their criticism.

What's their beef? It's that Boehner and McConnell would rather compromise or yield than fight for conservative causes against Obama and congressional Democrats. Grassroots Republicans prefer outspoken fighters like Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, even if the cause is lost or prompts a politically harmful exercise such as a government shutdown.

That a gap exists between GOP leaders in Congress and Republicans outside Washington is hardly a secret. Now a step has been taken, with more to come, to narrow that gap. It consisted of 30 minutes of Q&A last week between McConnell and directors of center-right think tanks at the

state level. Also invited were officials of national think tanks: the Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and Heartland Institute.

A conference call may not sound like much, but it's a start. McConnell has agreed to answer their questions every three months. Boehner, whose first session will come in a few weeks, has agreed to the same quarterly schedule.

The idea for this connection comes from Grover Norquist, the head of Americans for Tax Reform. He's been discussing the idea with McConnell and Boehner for months. He read the questions submitted by what he calls conservative "opinion leaders" to McConnell. More than 120 people joined the call.

The goal is for GOP leaders in Washington to explain what they're doing to influential conservatives around the country. "They haven't explained well enough," Norquist said. "That's a connection that hasn't been happening and needs to." It creates "the opportunity for better cooperation."

Much of what reaches conservatives and Republicans in the states has been "filtered through certain groups that have different agendas," Norquist told me. "It's useful to get it from the horse's mouth."

In last week's session, McConnell answered all but one question. That question was about how Republicans on Capitol Hill will respond if the Supreme Court bars federal Obamacare exchanges from giving subsidies to individuals to help pay the cost of health insurance. That's being studied, McConnell said. But "we'll be prepared to act."

McConnell seized the opportunity to explain how he's uprooted the way Democratic leader Harry Reid ran the Senate. This year, Republicans passed a budget. That hadn't occurred in the previous five years under Reid. "The Senate is up and running again," McConnell said.

Reid allowed few amendments to protect Democrats from having to cast a vote on controversial issues. Under Reid, there were just 15 votes on amendments in 2014. This year, there have been more than 100. "If you're afraid of tough votes, you ought to go into another line of work," McConnell said.

On issue after issue, McConnell said where Senate Republicans stand. Prospects for patent reform are "pretty good." Legislation to ban abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy is "on our agenda to be brought up," having already passed the House. Tax reform "needs a new president," McConnell said. "It's pretty obvious this president is not Ronald Reagan. . . . Barack Obama is not going to the center. . . . [He's] far left." Reagan engineered sweeping tax reform, with an assist from Democrats like Sen. Bill Bradley, in 1986.

McConnell said Republicans can invoke "reconciliation" to repeal parts but not all of Obamacare. That means a simple majority rather than 60 votes is required, thus thwarting any Democratic plan to filibuster. Republicans control the Senate 54-46. But the president is sure to

veto bills passed through reconciliation. “He’s not going to sign anything that only Republicans” have voted for.

In the 2016 election, Republicans won’t get to 60 seats to overcome filibusters, according to McConnell. The open Florida seat, he noted, is “quite competitive.” Incumbent Marco Rubio is retiring to run for the Republican presidential nomination. Republicans have an opportunity to win Democratic seats in Nevada and Colorado, McConnell said.

He revealed the tentative campaign slogan for next year: “Do you want four more years of the last eight years?” In Washington and beyond, Republicans agree the answer is no.