

HUFFPOST POLITICS

Despite Pulling Debt Ceiling Debate Rightward, Tea Party Activists Slam House-Passed Deal

WASHINGTON – Republican Lindsey Graham's position on the debt ceiling deal Monday made one thing very plain: the senior senator from South Carolina is scared to death of the Tea Party.

Graham, a 56-year-old second-term, rejected the deal early in the day, arguing that it "adds over \$7 trillion in new debt over the next decade and only makes small reductions in future spending."

"We hardly address the future growth of entitlements, a major contributor of future budgetary problems," said Graham, who is not up for reelection until 2014 but is already talked of as a major target for a primary challenge.

With a tweak here or there, Graham's statement could have come from the mouth of his state's junior senator, conservative firebrand Jim DeMint. Reports surfaced Monday that DeMint is so angered by the debt ceiling deal that he is considering supporting primary challengers to fellow GOP senators who vote in its favor on Tuesday.

The move by Graham -- a pragmatic politician who nobody would have accused in past years of being an intransigent ideologue -- was an example of the way the Tea Party wielded influence in the debt ceiling debate. It was not a case of power brokers flexing muscles in backroom meetings. It was, rather, the application of grassroots pressure being channeled through lawmakers such as DeMint, but also through long-established conservative advocacy organizations in Washington.

"The influence was more from pressure from the outside, rather than in-the-room pressure and influence," said a senior House Republican aide.

But, the aide added, "the Tea Party had some of their most powerful influence working with or through Beltway-type organizations like FreedomWorks, Americans for Prosperity, and Let Freedom Ring ... Even the Tea Party needs some 'establishment' help to get things done."

However, Graham's position did not prevail in the House, where the most significant obstacles to the deal's passage were overcome when 95 Democrats joined with 174

Republicans to approve the \$2.4 trillion increase in the debt ceiling, in exchange for at least \$2.1 trillion in spending cuts over 10 years.

The result left national and local leaders in the Tea Party fuming.

"It's kind of frustrating after all these battles starting with TARP and stimulus, the continued willingness of the political class to jam things through at the final hour," said Matt Kibbe, president and CEO of FreedomWorks, in an interview.

Kibbe called the deal "a political Band-Aid that's not going to satisfy the ratings agencies and it's not going to solve the debt crisis."

Andrew Hemingway, chairman of the Republican Liberty Caucus of New Hampshire, was more blunt.

"I hate the deal," he said.

"Moody's is saying we have too much debt already, so Congress says, 'Okay, let's add \$7 trillion over the next ten years,'" Hemingway told The Huffington Post. "And let's establish a commission to study where we can cut? Are you serious? ... It's all politics and there are no winners in this, only losers. We need real substantive cuts and we need them now."

The Cato Institute, a Libertarian-leaning think tank in Washington, posted a chart showing federal spending continuing to rise during the next decade even after the first batch of \$917 billion in cuts under the deal.

"The budget deal doesn't cut federal spending at all," said Cato's Chris Edwards, highlighting the fact that the cuts are from a projected budget baseline that assumes spending increases each year.

Bob MacGuffie, a Tea Party activist in Connecticut, called the debt deal "a sham."

"The msm [mainstream media] have all circled up this morning to call this a big victory for the Tea Party. That's all a charade so that we ease back and let this pathetic excuse for legislation pass," MacGuffie said. "Most of us have been working the emails and phones today to pressure the House to defeat this bill."

Supporters of the deal argued that it was a good start toward reining in federal spending.

"We are finally, finally getting serious about getting our fiscal house in order," said Rep. David Drier, the House Rules Committee chairman, as he kicked off debate Monday afternoon on the bill.

An adviser to House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) laid out a multi-tiered vision of how spending and entitlement reform will continue to dominate the discussion in

Washington. The budget debate this spring over a continuing resolution was step one, the aide said, the debt ceiling debate was step two, and the debate this fall over another continuing resolution to fund the government through the 2012 fiscal year will be a third step.

One top counselor to a leading Republican presidential candidate said that while the plan was flawed, "history will say that the Tea Party movement was responsible for us making at least baby steps toward the bigger structural problems."

Ultimately, the path being taken by Republicans in congressional leadership indicates a belief that sweeping changes to entitlement programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security is not possible unless and until a Republican is elected president.

But talk of "baby steps" is not enough for most in the Tea Party.

Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) -- who leads a conservative caucus of Republican House members and came under criticism last week for encouraging outside groups to pressure fellow Republicans -- was one of the first to cast a vote against the debt deal. Before the gavel was even struck to begin the 15-minute vote a few minutes before 7 p.m., Jordan sprang from his seat and took his electronic voting card out of his breast pocket. The gavel came down, the voting began and Jordan eagerly stuck his card in the slot at the end of the row, pushed a button, and a red light showed up next to Jordan's name on the board displaying all 435 members' names on the south wall of the House chamber.

Yet there were no protests outside the Capitol like there were for President Obama's health care overhaul when it passed in 2010 by an also-slim margin. A small group of liberal protesters was arrested inside the Capitol after protesting inside the House chamber against the Republican plan.

Doug Mainwaring, a Tea Party activist from Bethesda, Md., said that "the absence of big protest rallies on Capitol Hill during this debt ceiling debate reveals the fact that the Tea Party has been rapidly maturing."

"We're defined by a lot more than protest, and this will become more apparent as time goes on. Most folks are focused like a laser on the 2012 elections," he said.

If nothing else, the debt ceiling debate showed that if they want bigger wins, Tea Party members will have to do more than bring pressure to bear on lawmakers. They'll have to elect more of their own. Whether they can do so is an open question