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All hail the Congress

By [Ezra Klein](#)



(CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES) This week, Representative Paul Ryan, a Republican from Wisconsin, ended months of will-he-or-won't-he speculation by announcing that he won't run for the presidency. That sound you heard was a million conservative hearts breaking. But conservatives shouldn't fret: Ryan made the right decision. In our political culture, we overvalue presidents and undervalue legislators. The Cato Institute's Gene Healy has called this the "cult of the presidency."

"The chief executive of the United States is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws," Healy [wrote](#) in Reason magazine in 2008. "He is a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise. He — or she — is the one who answers the phone at 3 a.m. to keep our children safe from harm. The modern president is America's shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He's also the Supreme Warlord of the Earth."

The only problem? He — or she — doesn't have powers matching the job description. The president can't write laws. He can't pass laws. He can't stop laws from passing if Congress is determined to enact them. He can't go to war over Congress's objections, control interest rates or even command particularly impressive audiences for televised addresses. Even the areas where the executive appears strong and largely autonomous — national security, for instance — tend to be places where Congress is simply choosing not to exercise its authority. If the legislature didn't want us in Libya, we wouldn't be there.

Congress suffers from few such impediments. It can pass laws. It can override a presidential veto. It can control the Federal Reserve to some degree. It can declare war. The only thing it can't do is persuade anyone to turn on C-SPAN and watch its daily deliberations. Not that many members of Congress would really blame you for not watching. Most of the speeches you see on C-SPAN are happening before an empty chamber. Even members of Congress don't like to watch the sausage being made.

And yet we treat the president as the source of all power and Congress as something of a lapdog. When the economy is going well, we credit the executive. When it's going poorly, we blame the executive. When we want energy legislation passed, we wonder why the White House isn't doing more. When we want the Federal Reserve to act differently, we wonder why the president didn't nominate a different chairman.

Congress is complicit in this. I spend a fair amount of time talking with legislators and their staffs, and there's nothing I hear so frequently as "the president needs to give a speech" or "we need to hear from the White House" or "if the president would only work

with us." The cult of the presidency can safely count almost everyone on the Hill among its members.

But not quite everyone. There are a few members of Congress who seem to understand that they have the power, if they band together with enough of their colleagues, to set the agenda and drive policy. And perhaps no member of Congress has done that more effectively in recent years than Ryan.

There is simply no doubt that Ryan and the Republicans wrested the agenda from President Obama's administration this year. Ryan did it intellectually, using a radical — and, in my view, unworkable — budget proposal to redefine the limits of the possible in the discussion over entitlements.

His fellow Republicans did it procedurally, using a series of potential emergencies — including the need to fund the government through 2011 and to raise the debt ceiling to prevent a federal default — as leverage to force the White House to focus on their priorities rather than its own.

They have done this, of course, at great cost to themselves. Republicans are terribly unpopular right now, and Democrats think, and polling mostly confirms, that Ryan's budget redefined the conversation in a way that is likely to harm Republicans in the next election. But as Democrats argued during the health-care debate, politics isn't just about the next election. It's about what gets done in between the next few elections. One can imagine the intellectual and political work Ryan and the Republicans began this year resulting in significant policy achievements during the next decade or two.

Which is all to say that it's as easy to underrate the impact legislators can have on the president as it is to overestimate the president's influence on Congress. Political scientists tend to see presidents as "facilitators of change," to use a term coined by George Edwards, a presidential scholar at Texas A&M University. What they are mostly facilitating is the work of Congress.

But parties often don't think that way. They're as liable to obsess about the executive branch as everyone else is. So when they see stars emerging in a governor's mansion or in the House of Representatives, their first instinct is to wonder whether they can capture the presidency. That isn't always a mistake, but it often is: Parties tend to promote politicians who inspire the faithful, even though the work of the president is to craft a consensus among the faithful and the non-faithful alike. So far, Ryan has not proven he can do that. Quite the opposite, actually: His budget has been a deeply polarizing document.

Which is why Ryan's talents, although suited to his current position, aren't obviously suited to the presidency. By contrast, the star Republican governors — Mitt Romney, Mitch Daniels, Jon Huntsman, Chris Christie — have all demonstrated some facility with the work a president actually has to do. They've all shown they can appeal to both their natural supporters inside the party and potential supporters outside of it.

Ryan is only doing his party a favor by leaving the national campaigns to others — and using his position in Congress to set up the next Republican president for success.

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