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Once again, Speaker Boehner seems a prisoner of his caucus

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WASHINGTON — Once again, Republican conservatives in the House of Representatives look like they're insisting upon a rigid stand that's shackling Speaker John Boehner's efforts to compromise and pass a payroll tax-cut extension.

And once again, the question being asked all over Capitol Hill is: Is Boehner a pragmatic leader adept at keeping renegade Republicans unified — or is he being led by a band of staunch ideologues who are driving the party deep into a political ditch? The Ohio Republican has faced those questions all year, ever since his party took control of the House in January, its majority swollen by tea party-backed idealists averse to compromise.

The latest turmoil Monday involved the surprise rejection of a bipartisan Senate deal to extend beyond Jan. 1 a 2 percentage-point Social Security payroll tax break, plus long-term unemployment benefits and current Medicare payment rates to doctors. It was assumed Boehner would go along with the deal, but upon hearing blowback Saturday from his caucus, he announced he was opposed to the plan.

House conservatives' refusal to go with the plan "makes the speaker look ineffective," said Gary Jacobson, a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego.

Not to everyone, though.

"This is a pleasant surprise," said Judson Phillips, founder of Tea Party Nation, one of the conservative grassroots groups that helped elect dozens of House Republicans last year.

And Chris Edwards, an economist at the libertarian Cato Institute, thought Boehner was "doing his job — getting a majority within the Republican caucus."

But any congressional leader must build consensus to get laws enacted.

Newt Gingrich, speaker from 1995 to 1998, usually made sure that GOP moderates were consulted. Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Democratic speaker from 1977 to 1987, often said he built majorities with like-minded lawmakers from both parties.

Today, the parties are far more ideologically strict, creating problems for Boehner, a strong conservative also known as a consensus-builder. He won his leadership post in a mild upset in 2006 after scandals forced a shakeup at the top of House GOP ranks. Even then, conservatives were wary of his willingness to compromise — he and liberal icon Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., had joined together to craft a major education bill.

But Boehner's collegiality, as well as his distance from the disgraced leadership, proved irresistible to many Republicans, who made him their leader. Since then, of course, hard-core conservatives have gained strength — and complicated Boehner's life.

The divide between Boehner and his hard-charging conservatives became clear quickly in 2011. He and President Barack Obama agreed on a deal to cut \$38 billion in current federal spending, but 59 House Republicans opposed the effort, which won approval only because of Democratic support.

During the summer, Boehner came close to a mega-deal with Obama on deficit reduction before conservative opposition forced the speaker to pull back. A lesser deal was finally reached, but it included punting the major issues to a bipartisan "supercommittee," which wound up unable to agree. And 66 House Republicans opposed that bill.

In the latest round, Senate Republican leaders thought they had mollified the right on the payroll tax deal, thanks to its inclusion of an expedited review of the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which conservatives support and environmentalists oppose.

Boehner was "aware but not involved" in those negotiations, said his spokesman, Michael Steel.

It was assumed he'd go along — until a Saturday conference call with House GOP rank and file, who objected to the package, turned him around.

To some analysts, Boehner's behavior shows that he's largely at the mercy of the conservatives. Meanwhile, major battles loom before this Congress expires, notably whether to adjust or cancel the across-the-board spending cuts scheduled for January 2013, as well as expiration of Bush-era tax cuts.

Conservatives remain wary of Boehner.

"The tea party came in with a huge mandate, and he's done nothing," Phillips said.

In the Senate, some Republicans are furious.

"The House Republicans' plan to scuttle the deal to help middle-class families is irresponsible and wrong," said Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass. "We cannot allow rigid partisan ideology and unwillingness to compromise to stand in the way of working together for the good of the American people."

Ironically, Boehner's payroll tax-cut position could jeopardize the House GOP majority next November, particularly if the current impasse leads to higher taxes next month.

As Jacobson put it, "Republicans are putting themselves in a position to be blamed if taxes go up next week."

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