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For GOP House Whip Kevin McCarthy, the job is politics with a side of pizza

By: Michael Doyle and David Lightman – May 12, 2013

House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy is a genial man with a confounding job.

He holds one of the oldest political jobs in the book, just as the book is being rewritten. The Republican from California's Central Valley must corral votes from a caucus divided between true believers and those willing to deal. Sometimes he must cajole in search of the 218 votes needed for victory, though reforms have reduced his traditional inducements. Sometimes he must compel, though political changes have weakened his whip hand.

"Being whip now is different than with the whips in the past," McCarthy acknowledged in an interview. "The country is different, the rules are different. It's a different time."

The political book on McCarthy is that he does a good job at counting votes, of knowing where the 233 House of Representatives Republicans are at any given time. He points out that Republicans, unlike Democrats in a previous Congress, haven't lost certain procedural votes, called a motion to recommit, that are a test of floor control. He said he hasn't been surprised at vote results, a key part of the whip's responsibility to know the pulse of the caucus.

At the same time, the 48-year-old Bakersfield, Calif., native has been part of the leadership team that has sometimes been embarrassed by having to pull measures in the face of probable defeat, even as recently as about two weeks ago.

The bill would have provided funding to help uninsured high-risk patients buy coverage under the health care law for the rest of this year. But many conservatives objected, saying the 2010 law should be opposed, period.

"In the past, a whip has been two things: He counts the votes and tells the leadership what the reality is, and he influences votes," said veteran congressional analyst Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute. "McCarthy has been an effective counter, but only modestly effective at the other."

As whip, McCarthy ranks third in the House Republican leadership, behind Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia. It's an insider's job, once held by famously aggressive lawmakers such as California Democrat Tony Coelho and Texas Republican Tom DeLay. In the past, it's always carried at least an implied blend of menace and reward.

“It’s never as it’s portrayed in the movies,” said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif.

McCarthy, for one, is at the helm of a remarkably young caucus; about half of the Republicans have served four years or less. This means they have less institutional memory and, perhaps, less institutional loyalty. A legislative act that once was familiar and therefore relatively routine can now get more easily derailed.

The last farm bill, for instance, formally expired Jan. 1, with the House not even taking up its version. It’s a bill important to McCarthy’s own 23rd Congressional District, which covers most of rural Kern and Tulare counties south of Fresno. But with a five-year price tag approaching half a trillion dollars, for both farm and nutrition programs, it’s also a political challenge. Farmers are now operating under an extension that lasts until Sept. 30.

Meanwhile, House rules adopted as reforms have further complicated the whip’s job.

Congressional leaders used to be able to reward cooperative members with specific projects, called either pork or earmarks. Led by Republicans, Congress has for the time being foregone the practice as a sign of congressional reform.

“There are fewer of those tools today,” McCarthy said. “The biggest tool you looked at in the past was the earmark.”

Technology, too, has contributed to a diffusion of power, as has the growth of outside interest groups.

Political parties in the old days “were really strong . . . so that meant more strength in leadership,” McCarthy noted. Members needed the party for fundraising, for information and for a platform. Now, outside groups provide ample independent funding, social media spreads information directly and cable television and other media allow political reputations to bloom outside of leadership-approved venues.

“It’s a tough atmosphere,” said Michael Tanner, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. “As one of the young leaders, (McCarthy’s) leadership has helped push the leadership in a conservative direction. But it’s hard to say what being effective means anymore, especially in the House.”

The conservative crusade both boosts and shackles McCarthy. It makes it easier to build support for popular Republican causes such as repealing the 2010 health care law, even though the effort is strictly symbolic so long as Obama remains president. That’s OK with conservatives, who are willing to accept short-term losses if it means building long-term support.

CQ Roll Call, which has been studying voting for 60 years, found that during the two years of the 112th Congress, between 2011 and 2012, party unity was stronger than at any time since the studies began in 1953.

But a byproduct of this unified voting is that conservatives find more cause to criticize McCarthy for the few times he needs Democratic votes to pass key measures.

Three months after he became majority whip in 2011, for instance, conservatives rebelled against a last-minute deal designed to keep the government from shutting down. The conservatives insisted on more budget cuts, and 59 wound up voting against the plan, which passed only because 81 Democrats joined 179 Republicans.

Driving the point home, the conservative Club for Growth created a website, PrimaryMyCongressman.com, that lists Republican targets and details votes they consider objectionable.

This is no small thing. The Club for Growth contributed \$4 million to GOP candidates and spent an additional \$17 million on independent expenditures during the 2011-2012 election cycle, records compiled by the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics show.

Amid the crosscurrents, McCarthy stays afloat with many tools at his disposal.

Since his first House election in 2006, he's made a habit of poring through the Almanac of American Politics while on cross-country flights to understand every little detail about his colleagues' congressional districts. He's an adroit fundraiser, with the securities industry and the oil-and-gas industry among his leading contributors, and he has not slowed his pace since taking his whip post. McCarthy spent more than \$4 million during the 2011-12 election cycle, swamping his little-known Democratic opponent and doling out surplus cash to needier colleagues.

Separately, through his Majority Committee PAC, McCarthy distributed more than \$1.2 million among his fellow Republican candidates during 2012 cycle.

He's made his sprawling first-floor office space in the Capitol akin to a GOP clubhouse, with a rotating set of black-and-white photos of House Republicans on the walls and the morale-rallying slogan "Full Cry" posted above one exit. He'll have pizzas or other food brought in for Republican lawmakers to snack on between votes.

"He spends a huge amount of time establishing relationships," said Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Calif.

McCarthy also hosts regular dinners for members, like one several nights ago at Ruth's Chris Steak House, and he tries to build team camaraderie by asking members to tell about their first concert or their most embarrassing moment.

McCarthy's first concert, as it happens, was Johnny Cash. It makes sense, for the Bakersfield boy who, day after day, must now somehow walk the line.