

Chicago Tribune

May 15, 2011 Sunday
Final Edition

Brinkmanship mounts over debt limit \ Conservatives up the pressure as deadline for increase looms

BYLINE: By Kathleen Hennessey, Tribune Washington Bureau**SECTION:** NEWS ; ZONE C; Pg. 27**LENGTH:** 841 words**DATELINE:** WASHINGTON

While Republican lawmakers are tangled in negotiations with Democrats over how, when and by how much to raise the nation's debt limit, some conservatives outside of Congress are pushing a blunter approach: don't.

Tea party activists and others on the right are taking a hard-line strategy on the country's debt dilemma.

As the government inches closer to reaching the maximum \$14.3 trillion in debt allowed by law, they argue that rather than raising the limit, the government should instead live within its means.

That would require government spending to drop by roughly one-third -- more than \$1 trillion a year.

"This is the only way that we're going to get serious," said Mark Meckler, a leader of the Tea Party Patriots network. "They can pass all the plans in the world, but there's nothing that prevents them from amending those plans in the future. What does that is the debt ceiling. You can't spend money you don't have."

The idea has a populist appeal and appears to have considerable support in polling.

The debt limit vote is perennially unpopular in Washington, and members from both parties have taken turns voting against periodic increases.

Still, using the limit to dramatically shrink the size of the government represents a new conservative marker in the spending fight -- one put down by a populist movement seemingly well-positioned to inch lawmakers in its direction.

Republican leaders have rejected that approach, and economists and administration officials have warned that a failure to raise the limit would force the country to default on its obligations and could set off a financial crisis. Leaders of both parties agree the limit must be raised; the fight is primarily over what other belt-tightening measures accompany the decision.

But no-increase advocates continue to put pressure on conservative lawmakers, particularly those aligned with the tea party movement. Whatever terms are reached in a deficit deal, many House Republicans are likely to reject it for that reason.

"I think everybody's probing for their gag reflex," said Rep. Tom McClintock, a conservative California Republican who said he won't vote to increase the debt limit unless it is short-term and accompanied by significantly reduced spending levels, a deal unlikely to fly with Democrats in the Senate or with the White House.

He'd like to go further and not raise it at all, he said, but he's had to disappoint tea party activists on that front.

"I tell the groups, if you can show me how to balance the budget this year, I'm all ears," he said. "I want to do that. But things have gotten so bad I don't know how to do that anymore without massive disruptions to basic functions of government."

Under the tea party scenario, the government could choose to use tax revenues -- estimated to be more than \$2 trillion next year -- to easily pay the roughly \$200 billion in debt interest payments annually.

That would avoid the default Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has warned about, they argue.

"The notion of default is a myth," said Bob Vander Plaats, a conservative activist in Iowa who appeared at a tea party event in Washington recently to put pressure on lawmakers to hold firm. "When they reach that limit, they're going to have to prioritize and the first priority is to pay off your debt."

But without the ability to borrow more, the government would be forced to make some decisions some find unthinkable. In short order it would have to cut more than \$1.2 trillion from the budget in deficit spending, a figure comparable to spending on Medicare and Social Security.

"There's no question, from the perspective of Washington, this would be cataclysmic," said Daniel Mitchell, an economist at the libertarian **Cato Institute**. "In the real world, there's no way a political system would accept a 35 percent overnight reduction in the size of federal government."

Geithner rejects the tea party approach. He has said he can employ "extraordinary measures" to allow the government to pay its bills until around Aug. 2, but that a failure to raise the debt ceiling would roil financial markets and cut off basic services.

As House Republican leaders hold "listening sessions" to gauge their members' thoughts on the debt limit vote, they've heard from many who doubt the administration is being straight with them on the deadline and options available to Geithner.

"I think there's some sky-is-falling fatigue," said Erica Elliott, spokeswoman for House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., who has led the sessions.

Leaders have assured members that they will take all the time needed to reach a deal.

"If it takes until Aug. 2," she said.

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