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## **Baby Budget Hawks of the GOP**

Being better than Dems is not good enough.

By Michael Tanner

The conventional wisdom, pushed for very different reasons by both Republicans and Democrats, is that Republicans in Congress, controlled by radical tea-partiers, have been slashing government spending. Thus it becomes a little hard to understand how, in the few short months since last year's debt-ceiling deal, the federal debt has increased by more than \$1.5 trillion, roughly \$13,000 per household. If Republicans are such greatbudget cutters, how come we continue to spend more, run more deficits, and accumulate more debt?

The latest evidence suggests that it is because, contrary to conventional wisdom, Republicans still aren't such radical budget hawks after all.

For example, the latest Club for Growth scorecard suggests that, on the whole, Republicans in this congress have actually been less fiscally responsible than those in past congresses. For 2011, the average Republican received a weighted score of 69.5 out of 100. That's far short of the 86.3 average score in 2010, and it hardly suggests a tea-party-led wave of austerity.

Forty Republicans received scores of 90 or higher, and nine — Representatives Amash (Mich.), Chaffetz (Utah), Flake (Ariz.), Franks (Ariz.), Graves (Ga.), Huelskamp (Kan.), Jordan (Ohio), Labrador (Idaho), and Lamborn (Colo.) — received perfect scores of 100 percent. However, 25 Republicans had scores below 50. In fact six Republicans — Ros-Lehtinen (Fla.), Diaz-Balart (Fla.), McKinley (W.Va.), Smith (N.J.), Young (Alaska), and LoBiando (N.J.) — had scores worse than those of some Democrats, such as Dan Boren (Okla.). Interestingly, for all the attention paid to freshmen representatives who are supposedly in hock to the Tea Party, only three freshmen — Amash, Huelskamp, and Labrador — received perfect scores, while three other freshmen — Representatives Dold (Ill.), Meehan (Pa.), and McKinley — were among the worst-performing Republicans. Compare

this with 2010, when 28 Republicans received a perfect score from the Club for Growth and only two had scores below 50.

Of course one could argue that scorecards that focus on specific votes are not a particularly good measure of a lawmaker's overall record. Perhaps the votes were tougher this year, or the Club for Growth stopped scoring on a curve. Let's take a look, then, at a slightly different measure of fiscal responsibility, the National [Taxpayer](#)Union's latest measure of proposed spending increases and cuts by members of Congress. By this measure, there has also been an improvement by Republicans in this congress, but not an overwhelming one.

On an annualized basis, Republicans in the House proposed spending increases of \$5.3 billion and cuts of \$135 billion. Thus, if every one of their proposals had passed, total federal spending would have been reduced by \$130.2 billion, which is 3.6 percent of this year's projected spending. That would still have left us with a budget deficit this year of \$1.17 trillion.

That's an improvement over last year, when Republicans proposed a net spending reduction of only \$45 billion. So it's a baby step in the right direction — but far from what we need to keep us from falling off the debt-and-deficit cliff.

Moreover, the actual Republican record is not quite as good as even this baby step looks, because nearly all Republicans backed the repeal of Obamacare, which accounts for \$40.3 billion of the annualized [savings](#). Supporting repeal was easy, and it had no actual chance of passing. If we take that away, then Republicans called for only \$95.3 billion in other cuts, which is roughly 2.6 percent of federal spending. Overall, Republicans still seem unwilling to make the tough choices when it comes to spending cuts.

Those Republicans proposing the biggest net reductions in spending are Representatives Jason Chaffetz (Utah), Trent Franks (Ariz.), and Jeff Duncan (S.C.). Among the freshmen class in the House, Representatives Duncan, Huelskamp, Labrador, and Guinta proposed the largest net reductions, with the first three also receiving near-perfect Club for Growth scores.

On the other side, ten [House Republicans](#) actually proposed net spending *increases*, among them Representatives Chris Smith (N.J.), Chris Gibson (N.Y.) and Patrick Meehan (Pa.). Notably, Representatives Gibson and Meehan were also among those with the worst [voting records](#), according to the Club for Growth.

Let's look at one more measure of Republican seriousness when it comes to debt and deficit reduction: the most recent budget votes. Nearly all House Republicans, of course, voted in favor of the Ryan budget. While certainly not perfect — it would take more than 20 years to achieve balance — the Ryan budget nonetheless laid down an important marker on entitlement reform and spending restraint. Among the ten House Republicans who voted against the Ryan budget were both those who thought it spent too much money (Representatives Amash and Huelskamp) and those who thought it didn't spend enough (Representatives Gibson and McKinley, of course).

In the Senate, Republicans were less likely to support the Ryan budget, in part because Senate rules allowed them more alternatives. Still, the results from a fiscal-responsibility perspective were mixed. Only 16 Republicans supported the most fiscally conservative alternative, proposed by Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky. They picked up one more vote for a proposed budget by Senator Mike Lee of Utah. A third proposal by Pennsylvania's Senator Pat Toomey garnered 32 votes, and the original Ryan budget received 41. Four [Republican senators](#) voted against all four alternatives: Brown (Mass.), Collins (Maine), Heller (Nev.), and Snowe (Maine).

Recent weeks have also seen Republicans in the House vote to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank, an example of corporate welfare if there ever was one, and abandon the sequester for cuts in military spending. Senate Republicans also agreed on a highway bill that hikes the deficit in the long run.

None of this suggests that Republicans were not generally more fiscally conservative than Democrats. The average Democrat score on the Club for Growth Scorecard was only 10.95 out of 100. All but three Democrats in the House scored below every Republican, and six Democrats received a score of 0. The average Democrat proposed net spending increases of \$496 billion — almost half a trillion dollars in new net spending. Not a single Democrat voted for the Ryan budget, or for any of the lower-spending alternatives.

But better is not good enough.

Unless Washington gets spending under control, we are headed toward a debt crisis of Greek proportions, and time is running out. It's time for Republicans to live up to the hype and get truly serious about cutting spending.

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