

BIRTH CONTROL

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Speaker John Boehner: Now the hard part begins

As Speaker John Boehner takes up his gavel Wednesday, his agenda and leadership style will come under almost immediate scrutiny. The challenge: to govern and not to obstruct.



House Speaker-designate John Boehner of Ohio greets House members during the first session of the 112th Congress, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 5.

(Charles Dharapak/AP)

By Peter Grier, Staff writer

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Washington —

Rep. John Boehner (R) of Ohio takes the gavel as Speaker of the House Wednesday — a momentous step that represents a personal triumph and a political resurgence for his party.

But Congressman Boehner won't have long to savor his victory. Now the hard work begins, as he strives to balance the desires of tea party-backed newcomers to slash spending with the realities of Washington and the limits of his own new powers.

How will he interpret his governing mandate? Will he rush into conflict with President Obama over White House priorities? That would appear to be the case, given that one of the first orders of business in the new House will be to vote to repeal Mr. Obama's signature health-care reforms.

Five ways Republicans will change the House

But the American people might want more from their new speaker than confrontation and gridlock. Numerous polls taken since the 2010 midterm elections show that the majority of voters want the two great parties that govern the US to cooperate, instead of confront each other, notes William Galston, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution.

Independents, whose shift away from the Democrats handed the GOP the House last November, particularly want the nation's problems solved, writes Mr. Galston in an analysis of the current political landscape.

"The party that the American people come to see as the principal obstacle to progress over the next two years will pay a steep price in the 2012 election. It remains to be seen which party manages to avoid that fate," writes Galston.

Boehner, in his inaugural remarks as Speaker, will say that he understands the task ahead and will govern in a spirit of humility and respect.

Under Republicans, the House will be “honest, accountable, and responsive” to voters, Boehner will say, according to excerpts from his first speech distributed in advance by his staff.

“This is the people’s House. This is their Congress. It’s about them, not us,” Boehner will say.

Playing to his base

Obama, for his part, says that he realizes the new speaker will have to play to his conservative base for a period of time, through such things as the health-care repeal vote. But he also believes that the GOP will realize it now has more of a share in actual governance, and will work with him as it did on the compromise bill to extend the Bush tax cuts passed in the recently-ended lame duck session of Congress.

“My hope is that John Boehner and [Senate minority leader] Mitch McConnell will realize that there will be plenty of time to campaign for 2012 in 2012,” Obama said after returning to Washington from his Hawaii vacation.

Prior to its upcoming vote on health-care reform, the new House will strike a different note in that one of its first orders of business will be a reading, aloud, of the US Constitution. Under Boehner, bills must list the specific part of the Constitution that supports their intent.

The reading of the Constitution will be symbolic, to be sure, notes Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs at the Cato Institute. But he adds that symbols nevertheless are important.

“The new House, responding to the voters who sent them to Washington, will have thrown down the gauntlet, and the real work will then begin,” writes Mr. Pilon in an e-mail to reporters.

House to cut its own budget

On Thursday, the new House is also expected to vote on a 5 percent cut in its own budget, for an estimated savings of \$35 million over the rest of the fiscal year. GOP House leaders say they will continue to vote on bills to cut spending of some sort at least once a week for the foreseeable future.

But the future of spending cuts also likely points out the difficulty for Boehner of living up to the high expectations raised in the campaign. The GOP promised to cut \$100 billion from this year’s budget in its “Pledge to America.” Yet this year’s fiscal year is already one-quarter over, and finding \$100 billion in reductions at this point would entail mammoth reductions of up to 30 percent in many popular domestic programs.

Republican aides now say the \$100 billion number was a hypothetical, and that \$50 billion might be a more reasonable target for the year, according to numerous news reports.

But many of the new tea party-backed members of Congress scoffed at that change, saying that a \$100 billion cut would simply put the government back to its 2008 levels.

“Fifty billion dollars is not even scratching the surface. The debt problem is enormous,” said incoming Sen. Rand Paul (R) of Kentucky in an ABC interview on Wednesday.

Five ways Republicans will change the House