

The New York Times

Newcomers Challenge Leadership in the House

By [ASHLEY PARKER](#) - September 15, 2013

WASHINGTON — Representative Justin Amash, a sophomore Republican from Michigan, is not one to mince words.

For President Obama to strike Syria without seeking Congressional authorization, Mr. Amash warned on Twitter, would be “unquestionably unconstitutional and illegal.”

And when he mounted a challenge to the National Security Agency, over the objections of the leadership, that nearly passed the House this summer, Mr. Amash rallied his followers on Facebook, declaring ominously: “Have you talked to someone who has talked to someone who has talked to someone who has talked to someone who might be a terrorist? Well, the government might be spying on you.”

Mr. Amash, elected in the [Tea Party](#) wave in 2010, is part of a cadre of young, libertarian-leaning House members who have repeatedly hijacked their party’s agenda, frustrating Republicans and Democrats alike. Their approach has prompted backlash, like when House Republicans stripped Mr. Amash, 33, and others of plum committee assignments after they repeatedly challenged the leadership.

But now, armed with social media and a rigid set of beliefs, the self-styled revolutionaries in an already unmanageable Republican majority are making their presence felt — weighing in on issues like health care, government surveillance and Syria.

“There’s always a Justin Amash of every Congress,” said Ari Fleischer, a press secretary to former President George W. Bush. “It’s an uncomfortable, difficult, healthy part of the Congressional process.”

At a lunch this summer sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, Representative Raúl R. Labrador, an Idaho Republican and fellow Tea Party conservative, said that he and Mr. Amash were part of a group he jokingly called “the Wing Nut Coalition — where you have the right wing and the left wing working together and trying to get things done.” Mr. Amash, he added, was “chief Wing Nut.”

Mr. Amash rose to prominence in Michigan’s Third Congressional District — filling a seat previously held by a mild-mannered Republican physicist — by capitalizing on a five-way Republican primary, which split the vote and allowed him to coast to his party’s nomination with nearly 40 percent of the vote.

Boyish looking with an easy grin and rimless glasses, Mr. Amash quickly became a nuisance in his own party's ranks, irritating the leadership and some of its more establishment members, who viewed him and his cohort as petulant and unwilling to compromise.

He was one of four Republicans stripped of their committee assignments last year, and one of a dozen Republicans who did not vote to re-elect Representative John A. Boehner, Republican of Ohio, as the House speaker.

"They never ever vote yes," a Republican familiar with the dynamics of the House said on the condition of anonymity for fear of offending a fellow Republican. "There's always some more perfect thing that's completely impractical that they insist upon. They wind up pulling policy in the opposite direction from their stated goal, because if you are trying to pass something and you know they're going to vote no, you have to go to the left to pick up votes."

Mr. Amash says that he is simply representing his constituents, and that he frequently votes with his party. Mr. Amash has broken with a majority of his Republican colleagues 27.5 percent of the time, the most of any House Republican.

"We're filling a gap in leadership," Mr. Amash said. "There have been a number of important issues that have come up where our constituents are asking us to take a position to present their perspective."

Only midway through his second term in Congress, Mr. Amash is already considering a bid for Michigan's open Senate seat in 2014, though he is not expected to announce his decision until the fall. Liberty For All, a political action committee that supports candidates with libertarian principles, has already pledged "six figures" to support a Senate bid by Mr. Amash.

"Democrats are mad at Obama, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, and Republicans are mad at the Republican leadership," said John Ramsey, a co-founder of the PAC. "So it's a powder keg for libertarianism."

That libertarian streak surfaced quickly in July after revelations of sweeping surveillance by the National Security Agency.

Even though Mr. Boehner and other leaders supported the data dragnet and said they saw no reason for Congress to intervene, Mr. Amash rallied support and ultimately forced a vote on an amendment to the annual military spending bill that would have limited the N.S.A.'s ability to collect phone record data.

"It was a fairly interesting case of a junior member challenging, quite aggressively, the leadership and very nearly winning," said Christopher A. Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "Americans like those sorts of stories. It's a David versus Goliath sort of story."

Though the amendment failed narrowly, 217 to 205, Representative Thomas Massie, a Kentucky Republican who supported the measure, said the main goal was to get the lawmakers to take a tough, on-the-record vote about the government's surveillance program.

“We lost the N.S.A. vote, but that wasn’t the battle,” Mr. Massie said. “The battle was getting a vote on that issue. Leadership did not want to have a vote.”

Not everyone, however, was so pleased. Representative Mike Rogers, a Michigan Republican and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, took to the House floor to excoriate his home-state colleague and the amendment.

“This isn’t a game, this is real,” Mr. Rogers said. “Are we so small that we can only look at our Facebook likes today in this chamber, or are we going to stand up and find out how many lives we can save?”

When talk began of a strike against Syria, Mr. Amash went to work again, calling for Mr. Obama to involve Congress. Representative Scott Rigell, a Virginia Republican who was also first elected in 2010, organized a letter to Mr. Obama similarly urging him to consult Congress.

When Mr. Obama agreed to give Congress a voice on military action, Mr. Amash launched into overdrive — lobbying other conservatives to oppose the resolution; picking a fight on Twitter with Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, over his support for broad strikes; and holding 11 events over two days in his district in southwestern Michigan, where, he said, “there were zero people in favor of airstrikes in Syria.”

Recent developments have favored Mr. Amash. On Sunday, he said on the ABC News program “This Week” that he was pleased with the deal reached over the weekend between the United States and Russia to destroy all of Syria’s chemical weapons.

“I think most Republicans believe we’re in the right spot now in the sense that at least there’s a process where we can get the chemical weapons out there,” Mr. Amash said. “We haven’t achieved success yet, but at least we’re avoiding the bombing.”

But if the diplomatic solution fails and the House does vote on a resolution to use force, Mr. Amash will, as always, take to Facebook to explain the reasons behind his decision. And if Congress votes against military strikes in Syria and Mr. Obama proceeds anyway, Mr. Amash has words of warning.

“I think that’s a serious violation of the Constitution,” he said, “and there will be serious consequences.”