

# ROLL CALL

## Congressional Progressive Caucus Works to Increase Influence

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Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call File Photo

Taking a page from their conservative counterparts, House liberals are ramping up their efforts to become a force both under the Dome and on the campaign trail.

Over the past several months, the Congressional Progressive Caucus has begun formalizing ties to a number of outside groups and organizing internally to bring more pressure to bear on leadership.

"We've always been a great group, but in my opinion we've not punched above our weight; we've punched below," Rep. [Keith Ellison](#) (D-Minn.), co-chairman of the CPC, said in an interview last week.

Indeed, one Democratic leadership aide said the caucus "in the past hasn't been taken very seriously." And Rep. [Raúl Grijalva](#) (D-Ariz.), the other co-chairman of the caucus, said: "There's no question that part of all this is the sense of not being taken seriously. And so if we're going to be taken seriously, we're going to be serious."

The Blue Dog Coalition saw its membership cut in half after the bruising midterm elections, whereas the 77-member Progressive Caucus lost only a few in its ranks. Because of the group's naturally close ties to Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) and its strong membership levels, the caucus has historically functioned as a loose alliance with little strategic vision. This year, however, the group has become an outspoken force in Democratic Caucus meetings and publicly, where Members have offered policy proposals and even criticized President Barack Obama.

"I think all of the members just sort of got together and decided we had to step up our game," an aide to a CPC member said. "We can't just speak our piece and sit down. We have to speak our piece and figure out a construct to move it forward."

Aides and Congressional observers said the caucus became more organized during the 2009 debate over whether to include a public option in the health care reform law. While the group ultimately lost that battle — and drew criticism for causing public spats with fellow Democrats and the Obama administration — members learned how to better mobilize outside groups and build a press strategy that resonated outside the Beltway.

Grijalva said the caucus showed its independence during the debt limit debate, where 95 Democratic Members voted against the deal that President Barack Obama had crafted with Speaker [John Boehner](#) (R-Ohio). And while liberals "used to just be a 'no' vote" on Republican bills, Grijalva said they're now offering alternatives. In the case of the debt limit, Rep. [Peter Welch](#) (D-Vt.) spearheaded an effort to pass a "clean" debt limit increase. More recently, the group put forward its own jobs proposal, which includes increased infrastructure spending and higher taxes for wealthy Americans.

"Our view is we need more attention on jobs in America, and the outreach that Raúl and Keith are doing in all these cities is mobilizing support for an economic agenda that helps the middle class," Welch said.

The CPC held its first retreat earlier this year and released a budget proposal in April, which was drafted with the help of the liberal-leaning Economic Policy Institute. The caucus also recently hired a new executive director, Brad Bauman, whom aides describe as an aggressive and press-savvy strategist. Staff to Members within the caucus also are working together more closely, aides said.

Ellison serves as national chairman of community outreach at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and he has taken on a similar role for the CPC by forging alliances with outside groups. For example, the Progressive Congress Action Fund, a liberal advocacy group, sponsored the caucus's summer jobs tour to 12 cities throughout the country.

Ellison said, "There are comparisons to be made" between the CPC, the largest group within the Democratic Caucus, and the Republican Study Committee, which includes more than half of the House Republican Conference. The Minnesota Democrat maintained that "they're not on my mind" when it comes to building an infrastructure for his own group, but he acknowledged that the RSC's influence over the broader Republican Conference is something the liberals are looking to emulate.

"When you look at the right, they have the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, Cato, tons of right-wing think tanks," Ellison said. "What do we have on the left — the Center for American Progress? Great institution, but there is a clear imbalance between their conservative infrastructure and our progressive infrastructure, without a doubt."

Robert Borosage, co-director of Campaign for America's Future, said the Progressive Caucus is "filling a vacuum in the political debate at a time when the administration has retreated."

"You're going to see the caucus increasingly play the voice of a broad public that's locked out of the debate in Washington at a time of increasing economic distress," he said. "They're going to have greater and greater resonance across the country."

Grijalva said the caucus has reached out to unlikely allies, such as the Blue Dog Coalition, to figure out where the two can work together. The disparate caucuses have locked horns in the past, and it's unclear where they might find common ground. One Democratic strategist said the more outspoken liberals are currently muddling Obama's jobs message by picking apart his plan and are often too quick to complain when policy doesn't meet their standards.

"They could be doing a better job of going after Republicans," the strategist said. "As someone off the Hill, typically the only time you hear progressive voices is when they're complaining about the leadership or the administration."

Grijalva, one of those who has criticized Obama's jobs plan, disputed that claim and maintained that liberals "are still seen as loyalists." But, the Arizona Democrat said, "we can't be taken for granted."

"I think the administration sees the progressives that way, that at some point you have no choice but to deal with us," he said.

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