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Centrists likely to sway priority issues on Hill

By [Seth McLaughlin](#)

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Tea partyers may be getting all the attention, but the centrist wings of both parties remain the fulcrum in [Congress](#), though which way they swing depends on the issues lawmakers tackle first.

Moderates said if spending and fiscal issues dominate, then the centrists are likely to have the upper hand holding their caucus together and possibly attracting conservative Democrats; while if leaders push social issues, Republicans will have a tougher time maintaining unity.

"I think on the fiscal issues you are going to find a lot of coming together on the part of the party," said former [Rep. Thomas M. Davis III](#) of Virginia, who is now chairman of the [Republican Main Street Partnership](#), a coalition of centrist Republicans.

In addition to New England Republicans and Southern Democrats who are the traditional swing votes, freshman senators - including [Mark Steven Kirk](#), Illinois Republican; [John Hoeven](#), North Dakota Republican; and [Joe Manchin III](#), West Virginia Democrat - will be watched to see how they approach the issues. Eyes also will be on Sen. [Lisa Murkowski](#), who lost Alaska's Republican primary last year before winning an election by write-in vote over a tea party-backed candidate.

Asked Wednesday about her intentions, [Mrs. Murkowski](#) attempted to sidestep political labels, saying, "I don't think there are any easy issues anymore.

"I'm going to be approaching the issues as an Alaskan, looking at what is in the best interest of my state," she said. "You don't look at it from a Republican perspective or a Democratic perspective; you look at it as what is best for those you represent and your country."

The potential for swing votes became clear during the lame-duck session last month after a small group of Republicans broke with party leaders to help push through legislation to repeal the military's ban on gays serving openly in the armed services and to ratify a nuclear arms treaty with [Russia](#). They also supported a plan, which failed, to grant citizenship to some children of illegal immigrants.

But now that the treaty is behind them and Democrats have cleared the table of these divisive social issues, [Congress](#) is expected to turn its attention to fiscal challenges that tend to unite Republicans and splinter Democrats.

"Sen. [Susan] Collins is encouraged that there will be more moderate Republican senators in the 112th [Congress](#)," said [Kevin Kelley](#), her spokesman. "While she is excited to work with them on issues that are important to all Americans, such as jobs, the economy and reducing the debt, the reality is these are goals shared by both centrist and conservative Republicans."

That was apparent last month when the Senate Republicans who supported the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty — Ms. Collins and Olympia J. Snowe, both of Maine; Scott Brown of Massachusetts; and [Mrs. Murkowski](#) — joined fellow Republicans to block the Democrat-driven \$1.1 trillion

omnibus spending bill and insist on a two-year extension of all the expiring Bush-era tax cuts.

Also, with the exception of [Mrs. Murkowski](#), the group embraced the party's temporary freeze on earmarks, or pork barrel projects.

[Michael D. Tanner](#), a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank, predicts that the level of loyalty within the centrist wing of the [Republican Party](#) will hinge in large part on the agenda of [GOP](#) leaders over the next two years.

"I think if they stick to 'We are going to cut spending and taxes' they will keep these folks on board," he said.

Just as crucial will be [Mr. Manchin](#), who faces re-election in two years, and other Democrats such as Sens. Jim Webb of Virginia, Claire McCaskill of Missouri and [Ben Nelson](#) of Nebraska, all of whom are up for re-election in 2012 and who have signaled their wariness of the ballooning debt.

After the swearing-in ceremonies for the newly elected senators on Wednesday, [Mr. Nelson](#) told The Washington Times that the latest version of the political middle has yet to be defined.

"We just don't at this point in time how wide the middle is," the Democrat said. "It may be narrower than it was before. I don't know. It may be wider. With the new folks coming in, they will have to get their sea legs and see how they fit in on issues and how they fit into their caucus."

For now, both parties' leaders are trying to stake out their legislative agendas.

[GOP](#) leaders have vowed to repeal President Obama's health care overhaul, cut upward of \$100 billion from the federal budget and permanently extend the Bush-era tax cuts, which are now set to expire at the end of 2012.

Democrats have pledged to defend their legislative achievements, including the health care package, and push proposals aimed at lowering unemployment and improving the economy.

Both parties have pledged to tackle the national debt, which recently rose past \$14 trillion, and are gearing up for a tough battle over whether to raise the debt ceiling beyond \$14.3 trillion this year.

"If Republicans decide to say, 'We are going to refuse en masse to the debt ceiling expansion, unless we get something,' you won't see these [[GOP centrists](#)] going off and saying, 'We will vote for the debt extension without getting anything,'" [Mr. Tanner](#) said. "Now depending on what is dangled, [[GOP centrists](#)] may be quicker to join onto the compromise. They may only demand a half-pound of flesh, rather than a pound of flesh."

The shift of focus to spending could spell trouble on the Democratic side of the aisle, where Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Nevada Democrat, will need to deal with lawmakers from more conservative states on spending and budget issues.

"Democrats are actually going to have a couple of questions. You are going to have [Manchin](#) and [Nelson](#), which I think are more likely to vote with Republicans more than any Republican is likely to vote with Democrats," [Mr. Tanner](#) said.