

Pennsylvania's Sen. Pat Toomey is a leader on the debt question

July 17, 2011 | By Thomas Fitzgerald, Inquirer Politics Writer



Toomey (R., Pa.) says Democrats played on fear of catastrophe.

The debt limit is usually interesting only to a particular subspecies of policy wonk, but freshman Sen. Pat Toomey (R., Pa.) recognized even before taking office in January that it could offer the best chance in years to restructure federal finances.

While Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner was warning that the United States would default on its loans unless Congress quickly raised the \$14.3 trillion borrowing limit, Toomey was out front arguing that lawmakers should not do so without first forcing massive cuts in spending and limits on government growth.

That became the basic GOP bargaining position, but with the Aug. 2 deadline closing in, "the prospects are not looking good," Toomey said in an interview. "I'm increasingly worried that we're heading toward the worst-case scenario - a big increase in the debt limit with no changes in this disastrous process for our country."

He said Republicans had failed to develop and sell a concrete plan for reducing the debt, while the White House, he said, has been skillful in portraying them as obstructionists.

"They enticed us into a series of negotiations that went nowhere and were able to run out the clock," Toomey said. "They exaggerated fears of economic catastrophe. . . . These tactics were well thought up."

In his first six months as a senator, Toomey has positioned himself as the Republicans' Mr. Debt, hammering on the theme that fears of a default if the borrowing limit is not raised are exaggerated for political effect and pushing a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution.

Although he has not been at the mahogany oval table in the White House Cabinet Room with President Obama and congressional leaders, congressional insiders and outside analysts say Toomey could have some influence over the outcome. Over time, he has assembled a bloc of about two dozen GOP senators and more than 100 conservative House members, many of them elected with tea-party support, behind the premise that restructuring the budget is crucial.

"I do think Pat was the first to really make the case that a default would not happen," said Michael D. Tanner, senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, who studies fiscal issues. "When he came out with it, nobody in leadership had any idea what he was talking about."

Some conservative economists had argued for years that the debt limit, which congressional majorities of both parties have routinely raised, could be used as leverage to force cuts in spending, because the government would prioritize the repayment of debt and would have to stop spending elsewhere. On Jan. 19, Toomey injected the argument into the political conversation with a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece.

Sen. Jim DeMint (R., S.C.), a tea-party leader, later called the piece a "game changer." Toomey introduced what he called the Full Faith and Credit Act, which would have required Treasury to pay creditors first in the event the borrowing limit was exceeded. It came to a floor vote as an amendment to another bill, but was defeated, 47-52, along party lines.

Toomey followed that with a proposal that he said would balance the budget in 10 years, generating \$4.2 trillion in cuts by reducing and then freezing discretionary nondefense spending; it stalled on a procedural vote in May but got 42 GOP votes. He also negotiated among competing groups of Republican senators to draft a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution.

This week, both the House and Senate plan to hold votes on the Cut, Cap, and Balance Act, proposed by Toomey and Sen. Mike Lee (R., Utah), another freshman debt hard-liner. Their bill would increase the debt limit by \$2.4 trillion, the amount Obama wants, on the condition that domestic discretionary spending is cut back to 2006 levels immediately, then frozen for seven years. And both chambers would have to pass a balanced-budget amendment first.

Toomey, a former House member, was lobbying Speaker John A. Boehner (R., Ohio) and others last week to schedule the vote on the bill. It is considered likely to pass the GOP-controlled House, a symbolic victory.

A balanced-budget constitutional amendment would require a two-thirds vote in each chamber, however, and Democrats oppose it.

"We don't need a constitutional amendment to do our jobs," Obama said Friday during a news conference.

In a sense, Toomey argued, the symbolic victory would be enough.

"Finally Republicans will have articulated what we're for, rather than allowing the president to caricature us as just interested in protecting tax breaks for private jets," he said.

A coalition of dozens of conservative groups has been pushing for the cut-and-cap proposal, but many credit Toomey with getting the ball rolling.

"The senator's leadership has been great from the very beginning on the Cut, Cap, and Balance Act," said Alex Cortes, executive director of Let Freedom Ring, a national grassroots group based in Chester County that advocates fiscal restraint and traditional values. "He really created the pressure."

At the end of last week, though, it was looking increasingly likely that the only way out would be for Congress to pass a version of the fallback "Plan B" proposed by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.). It would allow the administration to raise the debt ceiling \$2.5 trillion in three increments - unless Congress passed a veto-proof disapproval.

"Sen. McConnell has argued for and been trying to achieve something big, constructive, and meaningful from day one," Toomey said. "I think he's come to the conclusion that the president doesn't want it . . . and he's trying to make the best out of a bad situation."

"But at the end of the day," he said, McConnell's proposal "allows the president to get an increase in the debt ceiling without spending cuts, and I can't support it."