

Tea Party Republicans May Crack Party Discipline: Ralph Nader

January 09, 2011, 9:03 PM EST

By Ralph Nader

Jan. 10 (Bloomberg) -- The hot question buzzing through Washington is: What impact will the many faces of the Tea Party have on congressional Republicans, now in charge of the House of Representatives?

Republicans under Mitch McConnell in the Senate and John Boehner in the House have been almost 100 percent unified -- a feat that has given them many victories over the Democrats. Any fracturing of that discipline can weaken the Republican Party on Capitol Hill and give new headaches for business interests.

The Tea Party phenomenon is really composed of three layers of political energy. First are the Tea Party people who range from pure libertarian Ron and Rand Paul types to defenders of plutocracy. They are mostly from the long-neglected conservative wing of the Republican Party that dislikes both the corporate Republicans such as George W. Bush and Dick Cheney as well as the Democrats like Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi.

The second layer is those new members of Congress who owe their election, many over incumbent Democrats, to the fund-raising energy and voter turnout of grassroots Tea Partiers.

While the third layer is composed of incumbent Republicans such as Representatives Steve King of Iowa and Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, and Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, who have declared their fealty to the Tea Party, though what that specifically means isn't clear.

It is no secret that the established Republican leadership is trying to co-opt the 87 newcomers in the House and 13 in the Senate to the ways of Washington. Even before the Tea Party reformers took office last week, the incoming class of 2011 had been treated to fundraising parties swarming with seasoned corporate lobbyists, some of whom they've already hired as staff.

Charges of Hypocrisy

The pressure last month from champion Republican earmarkers to support the \$1.1 trillion spending bill, containing more than \$1 billion in earmark projects inserted just by Senators McConnell of Kentucky, and Thad Cochran and Roger Wicker of Mississippi, provoked angry charges of hypocrisy from Tea Partiers back home. The result: Republican leaders in Congress jettisoned their members' earmarks and forced Obama to replace the bill with a short-term spending measure expiring in March.

But earmarks, which don't add significantly to the budget deficit, are just the low-hanging fruit. Bigger clashes between the Tea Partiers in Congress and the corporate Republican establishment will come this year. And nothing scares incumbents more than uncontrollable, high-energy, angry citizens back home who receive regular national media attention.

Five conflicts on corporate policies that likely will divide Republicans are:

No. 1. Curbing the Federal Reserve. Here Ron Paul of Texas, the new chairman of the House subcommittee overseeing the Federal Reserve, is straining at the bit to lead the way. Last year he had more than 300 House members signed on to a bill to audit the central bank. Paul has far more ambitious goals as his book, "End the Fed," outlines.

The central bankers are anxious about his growing influence. Paul has a demonstrated ability to articulate Fed issues. There is rising anger around the country against the central bank and its many secret bailouts. Moreover, there are a number of Democrats, including Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent, who have significant agreement with Paul's determination to overhaul this giant regulator and debt juggernaut whose budget is funded not by Congress but by banks.

No. 2. Watch for heightened criticism of corporate welfare programs -- numbering in the hundreds -- that feed companies subsidies, handouts and special protections from markets. The huge corn ethanol subsidy will probably be among the first to be challenged.

No. 3. After many years, the swollen, waste-ridden military budget, with its over-reaching corporate contractors operating in two unpopular wars, will receive bipartisan examination (with the help of libertarian think tanks such as the Cato Institute). The coalition building around the alliance of Representatives Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Ron Paul will start exposing this taboo subject. Defense contractors are bracing for a new pushback on procurement deals.

No. 4. The World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement and proposed bilateral extensions will receive Tea Party scrutiny, especially as China continues to de-industrialize America, all with the eager cooperation of American companies and their compromising of U.S. sovereignty.

No. 5. Whistleblower protection inside government and corporations strikes fear and consternation among both bureaucrats and corporate executives. Long-time Republican senatorial champions of expanding whistleblower rights against waste, fraud and abuse, led by Charles Grassley of Iowa, will have many new allies and support from progressive Democrats. The new financial reform law's whistleblower recovery rights, expanding on the federal False Claims Act, will force this issue to the forefront, judging by the early mobilization of corporate lobbies to weaken or repeal that provision.

During the four-year domination of Congress by Democrats, Republicans were able to put party unity ahead of principle. With their ascension to the House majority and having within their ranks independent freshmen and Tea Party-backed incumbents in both Houses, the Republican caucuses may now have legislators putting principle above party discipline.

(Ralph Nader is the founder of Public Citizen and author of the book "Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us!" The opinions expressed are his own.)

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