

Making the dysfunctional House functional

In the House, Republicans have a slim majority, which creates the potential for a hold-out problem. In this case, the problem is that a handful of Republican representatives can issue demands and refuse to vote with the rest of their party unless their demands are met. As a result, if the Democrats in the House stick together, the Republican party cannot pass bills and the chamber will become so dysfunctional that the government will shut down.

Moderate Republicans have a lot at stake. If voters believe that Republicans cannot govern, these voters will likely punish some moderate Republican House incumbents at the polls during the next election. As a result, the Democrats are likely to become the majority party in the House. To avoid losing their next elections, vulnerable Republican incumbents would love to solve the hold-out problem.

There are two solutions. First, the Republican caucus could give the speaker more power and enable him to punish any members of his party that issue demands. A generation and a half ago, House speakers used committee assignments and other means to keep their members in line. In recent times, most speakers seem to have lost this power.

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This alone won't be enough. The small group of Republicans who created the hold-out problem could respond by trying to oust the speaker (as we have recently seen). Their threat is meaningful because the speaker cannot stay in power with only Republican votes. But if the moderate Democrats had agreed to support the Republican speaker, he could have remained in power. With the Democratic support, the speaker would not have been held up by a small group of Republican house members.

The bipartisan moderate group can help the House resist the destructive urges of a handful of Republicans. It is obvious why the moderate Republicans would agree to such an arrangement. They will face less risk at the polls since the government won't be shut down and the Republican party won't be labeled as unable to govern.

The second solution is less obvious. A group of moderate representatives, drawn from both parties, could agree to support continuing resolutions that keep the government from shutting down.

The less obvious part of this solution is why would moderate Democrats agree to bail out Republicans who just seem to be inflicting wounds on themselves. Democrats might be willing to help Republicans because today's political climate suggests that during future Congresses the majority party will hold only a slim majority. When the Democrats become the majority party in the House, they will likely face a hold-out threat from a handful of their own members. The threat could lead to a government shut-down and to a Democratic speaker being ousted. The Democrats would gain from being able to rely on moderate Republicans to help them overcome the hold-out threats by Democratic representatives.

The moderates may be able to reach a cooperative agreement because future Congresses will likely have bare majorities and because over time the majority status will likely alternate between the two parties. In other words, both parties will face hold-out problems frequently enough that they can cooperate to avoid being held hostage by just a few members of their own party.

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