

How the Republicans Mishandled the Debt Ceiling Debate

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The Republicans in Congress have dramatically misplayed the debt ceiling negotiations. In addition to failing to play a constructive role in averting a debt and financial crisis for the U.S. which could have a global impact, the Republicans have also demonstrated that they are still more adept at attacking the president than they are at governing, and have missed a great opportunity to drive another wedge into the Democratic Party.

Governing often proves difficult for parties that have been out of power for a while. For example, in both 1993 and 2001, after years of not being in power, the Democrats won control of the presidency and both houses of congress, but Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama both had a difficult time passing their legislative agendas. The Republicans are in a slightly different situation now. They have not been out of power very long and, in fact, only control one chamber of congress. Nonetheless, the failure of the Republican Party to play a useful role in the debt ceiling negotiations is significant.

While the Democrats in 1993-4 and 2009-10 had some successes and some failures across a range of issues, the Republicans are in a different position in 2011. While out of power, the Republicans stressed the seriousness of the debt, making that issue their primary message. Moreover, they articulated the need to control spending as the only way to address this issue. The debt ceiling negotiations have forced the deficit into the center of the policy debate which should have been good news for the Republicans. Moreover, President Obama offered the Republicans a deal that was extremely conciliatory. Obama sought to address the deficit issue largely through reducing spending rather than raising taxes; and was willing to make changes to core programs, which have generally been viewed as untouchable by Democratic presidents, such as Medicare. Obama was prepared to do this despite the [inevitable, and legitimate, criticism](#) he would have faced from some in his own party.

In other words, Obama all but conceded victory to the Republicans. The Republicans in Congress proved themselves too disorganized, poorly disciplined or enslaved by ideological extremism to simply accept this victory that the President was offering. The deal that Obama offered was tilted so heavily towards spending cuts that it could easily have originated with the Republican Party, but instead of taking an easy victory, the Republicans revealed the degree of their internal division and inability to govern. Had they accepted Obama's proposal, the congressional Republicans would have been able to claim, quite plausibly, that they are driving policy in Washington and that the White House is no longer leading on policy questions.

By not seizing victory when it was handed to them, the Republicans also missed an opportunity to provoke division in the Democratic Party and more tension between Obama and parts of his liberal base. Obama's proposal was viewed by many progressives as another example of Obama prematurely making concessions to the Republicans. Had the Republicans immediately taken the offer made to them by Obama, the story would have been that John Boehner and the congressional Republicans were smart and tough negotiators who are serious about the deficit. The Democrats, for their part, would have been seen as divided between a base that is inflexible on entitlement programs and increasingly frustrated with the Democratic president, and a centrist wing that is weak and willing to concede anything to the Republicans. Instead, the Republicans are the party that has shown themselves to be divided and unable to govern.

The obstructionists amongst the Republicans in Congress do not have a lot of options. There is not going to be a better deal offered by President Obama; nor are the Republican leaders in Congress likely to fail to increase the debt ceiling. Significantly, if the debt ceiling is not increased, the ensuing economic and political problems will be blamed on the Republicans in Congress as they have been the more inflexible player on this issue. The more likely outcome however is that a deal will be cut that is smaller and not as big a victory for the Republicans, but one which they will have to support because they have no real choice.

In this scenario, any progressive rancor stemming from this deficit deal will be overshadowed by the coverage of Republican efforts to quell rebellion from those Republican congress members who oppose any deal that raises taxes by any amount. Moreover, it is possible that the final deal will not include cuts to the entitlement programs which progressives hold most dear, as that offer may no longer be on the table. Barack Obama has outplayed the Republicans every step of the way on the debt ceiling issue and may be able to snatch away an issue, the deficit, which should have been a big Republican advantage going into 2012.