

CQ TODAY
March 11, 2005

House GOP Leaders Facing Dissent on Budget

By Susan Crabtree, CQ Staff

The opening round of the budget process in the House continues to be a test of wills between Republican leaders and rock-ribbed conservatives distressed by the deficit and what they see as their party's failure to rein in spending.

Twenty current members of the Republican Study Committee, an increasingly prominent caucus of about 100 fiscal conservatives, broke with the GOP leaders to vote against the Medicare prescription drug law ([PL 108-173](#)) in 2003. Many of them now say they are ready to vote against the leadership again when the fiscal 2006 budget resolution reaches the House floor next week. GOP leaders cannot afford to suffer more than a dozen or so defections and expect to win adoption of their budget.

Although senior lawmakers are betting that the conservatives cannot prevail, the increasingly outspoken bloc is demanding that the budget resolution include mechanisms that would make it more difficult for the House to ignore spending caps.

"We're simply trying to have a budget that is not a mirage," said Jeff Flake of Arizona, one of about a dozen Republican Study Committee members summoned Thursday by Majority Whip Roy Blunt, R-Mo., for impromptu hallway negotiations.

Encircled by the rank and file, Blunt looked like a coach about to send his team onto a playing field. But that appearance was deceiving.

"I'm sick of all this talk that we need to be team players," one of the conservatives said later. "What they've been telling us for years is that we've busted the budget and there's nothing you can do about it."

The hallway gathering was Blunt's second of the day with the group or its leaders. Neil Bradley, the majority whip's deputy chief of staff and formerly the Republican Study Committee's executive director, was playing a major role in the talks.

By early evening, GOP leaders had offered the conservatives "greater transparency" in the budget process, promising to provide more information, including Congressional Budget Office scoring, on the cost of legislation considered on the House floor.

"We want to make more information available," said a GOP aide. "CBO would be one source, but it is not the sole source."

Seeds of Discontent

The conservatives did not immediately accept the offer, and expressed frustration that the leadership was using Blunt as its middleman. Republican Study Committee members said Blunt and Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, have been sending mixed messages about their commitment to reducing federal spending.

During a House Republican Conference meeting in December, for instance, some conservatives pushed for House rule changes that would have required enforceable spending limits. DeLay, two Republican lawmakers said, went so far as to suggest that fiscal conservatives vote against rules providing for floor action on appropriations bills if those bills would violate the budget resolution's spending ceiling.

But votes on resolutions setting ground rules for floor debate are usually considered tests of party loyalty, and defections are not taken lightly.

"It's now known as the Blunt rule," explained one House Republican. "You vote against the rule and you're [kicked off] the whip team."

According to those present at the December session, when DeLay suggested voting against the rules for action on offending appropriations bills, Blunt shook his head in disagreement.

At that point, Republican Study Committee members now say, they decided that the best way to convince GOP leaders to take a hard line on spending would be to threaten to oppose the budget resolution.

Led by Mike Pence of Indiana and Jeb Hensarling of Texas, the conservative group earlier sought to change House rules to require a three-fifths majority vote to waive procedural objections to spending bills that exceed spending limits. After GOP leaders warned that such a change could permit Democrats to wield too much power when appropriations bills are debated, the conservatives changed course.

The group now wants a rule that would permit them to block, with the support of a simple majority, bills that exceed spending ceilings.

The conservatives have also tempered their rhetoric. "We were having a monologue, we are now having a dialogue and I hope there will soon be an epilogue," Pence said. But senior Republicans said the Republican Study Committee is unlikely to score any significant victory in a confrontation with a leadership team that has shown little tolerance for dissent.

"My prediction is, after the dust settles, they'll be voting for the budget next week," said Ray LaHood, R-Ill. "Just like last year."

A year ago, Republican leaders defused a conservative rebellion against the budget resolution by promising that the House would vote later on budget enforcement legislation. Months later, that measure was defeated by a wide margin.

Jonathan Allen contributed to this story. © 2005 Congressional Quarterly Inc.