

House Conservatives Demand Tougher Spending Curbs

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For the second year in a row, House conservatives are taking aim at spending by threatening to pull their support for the congressional budget resolution if it does not include language making it much more difficult to evade the budget's spending limits.

Last year, fiscal conservatives supported the budget after Republican leaders gave them a vote on a separate budget enforcement bill in June, but it did not come close to passing.

But this time, at least initially, GOP leadership aides said fiscal conservatives have a better chance of getting some sort of enforcement measure adopted because more members are concerned about rising deficits.

The Republican Study Committee (RSC), a conservative group that boasts 100 members, discussed its plans with Joshua B. Bolten, director of the Office of Management and Budget, and emerged from the meeting convinced they had Bush's support for their budget strategy.

House Republicans are planning to follow up with a special conference meeting on the budget Thursday morning.

RSC Chairman Mike Pence, R-Ind., and several other members of the group are negotiating with GOP leaders over the group's desire to attach some form of an enforcement measure to the budget before it comes to the floor.

In the past, Pence said House conservatives have been willing to "uncouple" their support for the budget from their support for enforcement, but they will be unwilling to do so this year.

"This isn't about getting another Don Quixote vote," he said. "We want to fundamentally change the objective of the way we spend."

Supermajority Option

Pence said several options are on the table. But conservatives - as well as several moderates who are fiscally conservative - are coalescing around the idea of changing House rules to require a new supermajority, or three-fifths vote, to waive points of order against any increases in direct spending.

Mark Steven Kirk, R-Ill., a champion of such a change, said about 15 moderates, and some 60 House members overall, want budget enforcement language, such as the supermajority to waive points of order, attached to the budget.

Without such language, supporting the budget would be a "difficult vote" for this group of fiscal conservatives, he said.

A GOP voting bloc of that size could prove crucial to House leaders' ability to adopt a budget, because few Democrats have crossed party lines to support Republican budgets in recent years.

When asked if fiscal conservatives would be successful in their efforts this year, Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, said only that "it was a little too early to start drawing lines in the sand."