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A Bad Week for Limited Government

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Saying “No” to Spending Controls

In a closed meeting early last week, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives quietly kicked off the new legislative session by making it more likely that government will continue to grow rapidly. Despite promises to control the growth in federal spending and to fix the budget process, the newly strengthened House Republican conference soundly rejected a series of proposed procedural rules, sponsored largely by conservatives, that would have made it more difficult for spending increases to pass the House. The full House passed its new rules—absent additional spending controls—the next day in a party-line vote.

Rejecting rules to rein in spending is not just a slap in the face for supporters of spending control and conservative principles; it will now also be politically and technically harder for the House to support the President’s promise to limit spending. Republican lawmakers often and correctly blame the chamber’s rules for out-of-control spending because the rules make it hard to avoid an increase in spending when one party holds only a slender majority, even when those increases run counter to the majority’s wishes. But the rules of the legislative game are not immutable. Every two years, the House of Representatives adopts a new set of rules that govern its operations and legislative process. The majority party essentially can write these as it pleases.

This year, the conservative Republican Study Committee and other members committed to fiscal discipline proposed eight important rule changes that would have reformed the budget process to make it more difficult to expand entitlements and other spending. None of these rules passed the Republican conference. None came even close to a majority—and these are the Republicans, who are ostensibly committed to limited government. Voting down tools that would restrain spending makes it increasingly difficult to take most House Republicans seriously when they talk about spending restraint.

Are They Serious?

Can the House Republicans be considered serious about spending restraint when they—

- **Refuse to raise the bar for enacting increases in entitlement spending?** Entitlement spending, especially on health care, is soaring and unless tackled will lead to enormous deficits or huge tax increases. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-IL) proposed a rule that would require a three-fifths majority in order to increase mandatory (entitlement) spending or to create a new entitlement program. The House Republican conference defeated this proposal overwhelmingly.
- **Refuse to require a stand-alone vote on raising the national debt?** Rep. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) wanted to repeal the so-called Gephardt rule, which allows the debt limit to rise automatically when the House approves spending plans that would exceed it. A stand-alone a vote on the debt limit is an embarrassing reminder that Congress has failed to control spending; in the past, debt-limit votes have often triggered action to control spending. The current Gephardt rule allows members to avoid the embarrassment of having to vote to raise the debt limit,

which is why Rep. Flake and others wanted it removed. But again, the Republican conference soundly rejected sensible reform.

- **Allow expensive legislation to be approved by voice vote?** Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-MN) proposed a rule that would force a roll call vote on bills that would cost more than \$50 million. This change would have helped to hold individual members responsible when they vote to increase spending. The Republican conference rejected this rule, as well.
- **Allow their own rules to be conveniently ignored?** Weak though existing spending controls in the House may be, the conference wants the ability to wiggle out of those rules as easily as possible. House Republicans rejected a proposal that would require a vote before points of order (e.g., invocation of procedural rules when a proposed spending item would exceed budget limits) could be waived. Likewise, the Republicans rejected a proposal that would send budget-busting spending bills back to the Budget Committee.
- **Refuse to close the emergency spending loophole?** Every year, even when the appropriations process conforms to its spending caps, Congress circumvents those caps with emergency spending measures. Even routine appropriation bills can be designated “emergency” in this federally-approved way of cooking the books. Rep. Mike Pence (R-IN) proposed a rule that would end this practice and establish a rainy day fund as part of the annual budget process. This fund would be tapped for all emergency spending, such as on hurricanes, droughts, and fires. The House Republicans rejected this proposal, too.

What Were They Thinking?

After the election, hopes were high that a re-elected President and expanded Republican majorities in the House and Senate would be able to bring about a return to the conservative principle of fiscal discipline. Indeed, House Republicans promised that they would bolster their efforts to rein in spending. But throwing out all of these proposed rules makes it more difficult to accomplish this stated aim. Whatever the political calculus involved, rejecting rules that would make irresponsible spending more difficult is self-defeating. One can only wonder what many of these same members would have said had a Democrat-controlled House voted down similar rules. Americans concerned about controlling the size of government can only hope that the members who sponsored the rejected rule changes will continue to press for stronger budget controls and will eventually prevail.

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