

Super Congress Moves Forward Despite Tea Party Opposition

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WASHINGTON — A powerful coalition that includes Tea Party members of Congress rejected a debt ceiling offer from House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) on Monday, calling a proposed bipartisan, bicameral committee that would draft deficit-reduction legislation “troubling” — not because it would afford too much power to too few people, but because they said it could lead to tax increases.

Nevertheless, separate proposals put forward by Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) on Monday each included versions of a Super Congress — referred to on the Hill as a Super Committee — that would write laws that could not be amended by the regular Congress, only voted up or down. In Boehner’s version, the debt ceiling would be raised a second time if Congress approved the cuts decided on by the Super Congress.

“Perhaps most troubling is the proposed Congressional Commission. History has shown that such commissions, while well-intentioned, make it easier to raise taxes than to institute enduring budget reforms,” reads a statement put out by the Cut, Cap and Balance Coalition, which is made up of a number of Tea Party groups.

Erick Erickson, a leading conservative blogger, was equally dismissive of the joint committee. “For thirty years and seventeen debt commissions we have raised the national debt \$13 trillion, seen taxes rise and fall and rise again, uncertainty come and go, and Washington remain unchanged,” he wrote on his blog RedState. “And now some of you want to seek cover by having yet another commission — but this time it will be different! Sure.”

The liberal advocacy organization MoveOn.org, meanwhile, argued that any joint committee empowered to make cuts should specifically exempt Medicare and Social Security from cuts, and is organizing members in opposition. “[A]ny Joint Congressional Commission must be set up in such a way that it protects Social Security and Medicare benefits. Any plan that includes a backdoor to cut those vital programs is just as unacceptable as one that puts the cuts up front,” said MoveOn head Justin Ruben.

Progressive opponents of the Super Congress, however, argue that its very purpose is to cut entitlements, so negotiating its parliamentary outline misses the point. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) told FireDogLake.com that he would approve of a “commission that makes recommendations,” but not one empowered to send fast-track legislation to Congress. “But if it’s got any kind of parliamentary advantage, then no,” he said.

Boehner described the new legislative body in a summary of his proposal released by his office Monday afternoon:

The framework creates a Joint Committee of Congress that is required to report legislation that would produce a proposal to reduce the deficit by at least \$1.8 trillion over 10 years. Each Chamber would consider the proposal of the Joint Committee on an up-or-down basis without any amendments. If the proposal is enacted, then the President would be authorized to request a debt limit increase of \$1.6 trillion. Story continues below The structure of Reid's proposed Super Congress is similar to Boehner's, though the legislation it would consider would not be tied to an increase in the debt ceiling. Reid and the White House insist that the debt limit must be increased enough now to extend past the 2012 election, saying that any short-term increase is a non-starter and will be vetoed. Boehner, meanwhile, wants a two-part process that forces the president to once again absorb the political pain that comes with raising the debt ceiling in several months.

Reid's plan, according to a spokesperson, would create a 12-member body that includes six Democrats and six Republicans, with an equal number coming from the House and Senate. Legislation would need seven votes before heading for Congress, where it would face a fast-tracked, up or down vote.

The Super Congress amounts to an institutionalization of the gang structure that exists informally in the Senate, where a small number of lawmakers write legislation behind closed doors and then announce it to the public. Legislation written by the Super Congress would be extremely difficult for individual members of Congress to stop.

UPDATE: MoveOn's Justin Ruben sends the following statement firmly opposing a Super Congress that would be able to cut Social Security or Medicare: "Republicans want a Super Congress so they can push through unpopular cuts to Medicare and Social Security. MoveOn members, and the vast majority of Americans, oppose benefit cuts, and Democrats shouldn't give Republicans a vehicle to make it easier to cut them. MoveOn members oppose the idea."

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