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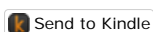
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The Republican victory in the midterm election was decisive. Now the victors must chart a sensible course for the next two years—one that demonstrates they can be trusted as America's governing party and sets the table for 2016.



MITCH MCCONNELL, CENTER, WITH FELLOW GOP SENATORS JOHN BARRASSO AND JOHN CORNYN

AP / J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

The landscape is more treacherous than it looks. The Republican majority is strong in the House but surprisingly thin in the Senate. Even with 54 Republican senators (if Rep. Bill Cassidy is victorious in his runoff against Mary Landrieu in Louisiana), there will be precious little room for maneuver, as a few defections on any given vote would give Democrats the upper hand. Moreover, Democrats are sure to hold together at least 41 senators, and probably more, on critical votes. That gives them the power to filibuster most legislation pushed by Republicans, which can only be overcome with a supermajority of 60 votes. Then there is the problem of the presidential veto. If Republicans somehow manage to get a piece of legislation through both chambers, the president can still kill it. Rounding up enough votes for a congressional override under these circumstances would be the longest of long shots.

At the same time, there is much pent-up frustration among conservatives that is already turning into high expectations for the incoming Congress. The GOP's core supporters have watched with increasing dismay and alarm as the president has implemented his agenda, often with arguably unlawful executive actions, and they will expect a Republican Congress to put a stop to it. Complaints about the limited power of one branch of government are unlikely to go over well.

So a Republican Congress will have to balance the need to make tangible progress in rolling back the Obama agenda against the very real obstacles it will face in trying to achieve that goal.



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To navigate this difficult terrain, it will be important for Republicans to clearly set expectations and articulate their goals at the outset. The first temptation for the new Congress will be to follow the 1995 road map. After the Republican sweep of 1994, the House spent the first months of 1995 passing the legislative provisions of the Contract With America. Although important symbolically, these bills were not consequential in terms of reforming government. The real work in early 1995 was taking place behind the scenes, as House speaker Newt Gingrich, House Budget Committee chairman John Kasich, and the key committee chairmen plotted out a balanced budget plan that incorporated just about every feature of a conservative vision for governance: tax cuts and reforms; major changes in entitlement programs; welfare reform; elimination of scores of programs and agencies; and significant spending reductions.

The idea was to lay out a comprehensive agenda that contrasted sharply with the plans of President Bill Clinton, precipitate a confrontation of some sort, and then use the power of public opinion to force the president to accept a substantial part of the Republicans' program. It was also important that the budget process, and especially budget reconciliation, allowed this plan to move forward in the Senate without any supportive votes from Democrats.

The 1995 strategy did not work as planned, to put it mildly. It took nearly a year for the Republican leadership to draft and pass its agenda. During that time, very little else was considered in Congress, as the entire GOP agenda was wrapped up in the budget process. Democrats spent the year regrouping and attacking the politically weak points of the Republican approach. In the confrontations with the Clinton administration that ensued, it was the Republican Congress, not the president, that suffered the most in public opinion. President Clinton's standing with voters improved dramatically as the confrontation dragged on into 1996, and he won reelection handily over Sen. Bob Dole.

In the end, Republicans did secure enactment of welfare reform in 1996—a major achievement. But little else from the 1995 reconciliation effort made it into law, save for the creation of child tax credits.

In 2015, Republicans should resist the temptation to pursue a 1995-style maximalist agenda, which would very likely squander valuable time and ultimately put the party in a worse position heading into the critical election of 2016.

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