

v1 - Freedom Caucus.mp3

Andy Biggs I thought the last plan wasn't good enough. I had no idea. I had no idea that we would see a plan as ephemeral and as malodorous as this plan.

Steve Scalise You know, we took a stand in January to end the era of the imperial speakership. We're concerned that the fundamental commitments that allowed Kevin McCarthy to assume the speakership have been violated as a consequence of the debt limit deal.

Matt Gaetz I'm sick and tired of having to pay the cost. For the extremist ideas of these control freaks working in these agencies.

Ron Hansen House Speaker Kevin McCarthy struck a deal with President Joe Biden to avert a default by the federal government. It passed on a bipartisan basis with more Democrats voting for it than Republicans. And now some of the most conservative Republicans in the House, many of them in the House Freedom Caucus, are making him pay for it. These hard liners, including Arizona Congressman Andy Biggs, upended Republican plans to pass bills intended to prevent Biden from outlawing gas stoves. Then they forced the chamber to cancel any votes the next day. That led GOP leadership to cancel days more of votes. The standoff lasted nearly a week before the hardliners allowed voting to resume. It's a power struggle between the right and the far right. Welcome to the gaggle, a weekly politics podcast from the Arizona Republic and azcentral dot com. I'm your host, Ron Hansen. I cover national politics for the Republic. My co-host, Mary Jo Pitzl is out this week. Today we're talking about the intraparty battle among House Republicans, principally with members of the far right House Freedom Caucus. Joining me remotely to discuss what this is all about, where it could lead and why so many Arizona Republicans are part of the Freedom Caucus is Matthew Green. He's a professor of politics at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and is the author of Legislative HARDBALL, the House Freedom Caucus and the Power of Threat Making in Congress. Professor GREENE, thanks for taking time to chat with us.

Matthew Green Thanks for having me.

Ron Hansen So this showdown last week between conservatives and GOP leadership seemed to surprise a lot of people on Capitol Hill. Should it be a surprise after a debt ceiling deal that passed without them?

Matthew Green Well, I think the reason that it was a surprise is that the norm for dealing with party disputes is it gets done behind closed doors. And by the time you get to the House floor, whatever differences there are or disputes are resolved, in this case, those disputes were not resolved. And so what happened is the leaders in the House Republican Conference were caught by surprise. And so as the vote is happening, they realize they don't have the votes to pass this rule to consider a series of bills. And so that's just doesn't happen very often in the House. And as a result, we end up with this sort of stalemate going on in the House right now.

Ron Hansen There were some rumblings about possibly seeking to oust Speaker McCarthy. That seemed to quickly fizzle. But there is obviously a lingering resentment toward him and the direction of the House. Is this a group that's just acting out, for lack of a better description, or is there a realistic strategic end game for the folks who are most upset with the speaker at the moment?

Matthew Green So if you look at this defeat of a House rule, good amount of that does appear to be nonstrategic. In other words, it's just a number of Republicans who are angry. They're upset about the final debt limit bill that passed the House. And for lack of a better phrase, yes, they're sort of acting out. It doesn't appear to have been organized and it certainly wasn't led by the House Freedom Caucus. This is just a subset for the most part of members of that caucus. But if history is any guide, it is a warning sign. We have seen before in the history of the House that when there are members upset enough to derail the majority party's agenda, if they don't feel that their concerns are being met, they can organize. This happened to Speaker Newt Gingrich back in 1997, a similar thing. A rule on the House floor was defeated by the same number of Republicans, 11 Republicans unhappy with Gingrich's leadership. Their concerns were not that, and they eventually plotted to overthrow the speaker using, in fact, what we talk about now, the so-called motion to vacate. So it is a real concern or should be for McCarthy that these Republicans, for whatever reason, were willing to derail the majority's agenda.

Ron Hansen One of the things that seems very striking at the same time this is all playing out is, of course, the fragile GOP margin in the first place. They have a nine seat majority, five seats flip, and the control of the House could change. It seems like it's the sub current with all of this that the Republicans really have to thread the needle to move forward with anything that is truly in line with the conservative agenda. And if it's not, they're going to have a lot of Democrats on board with them. How much does this get complicated because of just the math of harnessing a majority? For Republicans.

Matthew Green The size of the Republican majority in the House is absolutely essential. It is probably the single biggest contextual variable that is kind of shaping all the politics that we're seeing in the Republican conference. There's an old saying on the Hill. So there's 435 members of the House, and so a majority is 218. There's an old saying in Congress that the only thing that matters around here is 218. Nothing else matters. So in an era of highly polarized politics where minority party members are rarely going to vote with the majority, that really constrains whichever parties in charge. They've got to get that to 18, mostly from their own ranks for big divisive bills and also for procedural votes like this rule vote. And so, as you said, with McCarthy and his leadership allies having just a small, small majority, it really only takes five Republicans to join a united Democratic Party to effectively hijack the floor. And what we are seeing is that the real energy behind dissents, the real dissenters in the Republican Party, are on the right side of the spectrum. Members of the Freedom Caucus not solely, but largely. And that makes it difficult for McCarthy to move the agenda to the middle because he's got only a handful of conservatives who can say, nope, that's not conservative enough for us. And they can defeat bills on the floor.

Ron Hansen Should we view this latest hold up in the House as a sign of strength for that faction or a sign of irrelevance involving the hard liners who are most upset with McCarthy? In other words, this is the only card they have to play. Or introducing what feels like chaos to house affairs. But is it really something that reflects their strength or, you know, just their frustration?

Matthew Green I think it's a great. Question because on the surface of it, it would appear that this faction, these 11 members who voted against their leaders, are powerful, that they can hijack the House floor. But if you think about it more carefully, the fact that this didn't appear to be planned wasn't organized. That is done on completely unrelated legislation that in theory these conservatives want suggests that it is more of a reaction against losing on the floor. You can think of it another way, which is if the these conservatives in the

House Freedom Caucus more generally had more influence, they would have blocked that compromise debt limit bill in the first place. We would still be dealing with the debt limit. We'd have a bill that's more conservative. But they failed to do so. And by failing to win on a big issue that matter to the caucus, they were sort of left with just this kind of protest vote. The other thing to think about is that how long realistically, can this continue? It's one thing to say we're going to vote against a rule, but, you know, as days go by, your colleagues are going to say, look, I've got things I want to pass. Why are we doing this? What's the point? So in that respect, also, one could argue that this is more a sign of weakness than strength.

Ron Hansen It seems worth noting, at least to me, that while Republican hard liners bottled up the voting on popular measures with Republicans last week, Republicans in swing districts, the ones who think of themselves as the reason that the party has the gavel at all, were reportedly complaining behind closed doors at leadership about voting on issues like abortion rights that imperil the appeal to the base or appeal to the base, but imperil the majority. So it feels like there's kind of a paradox with all of this. The narrower the majority, the more influence the Freedom Caucus and like minded members theoretically have, But the more influence that the caucus has, the more tenuous the Republican majority is.

Matthew Green The absolutely so. And this is not just McCarthy. This is what has happened to Democrats, too, and Nancy Pelosi, particularly after the 2000 election, where you've got fairly small majority. She didn't have one as small as McCarthy does, but not a huge majority. And you've got you've got these what she called majority makers, folks from swing districts. And so it's really important that they get reelected so you can maintain that majority. But again, where the energy is, where the activism is, is on the extremes. It's on the extreme left and the extreme right. And they're not usually interested in compromise, certainly not in a way that might water down their goals to help a handful of members in swing districts with whom they may not agree with ideologically anyway. So McCarthy has that problem, but Pelosi had that problem, too. John Boehner had that problem. Speaker Paul Ryan, when, again, a very highly polarized environment where you can't count on votes from the minority party, you've got to find a way to build a coalition. And our parties are diverse, even as polarized as we are, we still have parties that have moderates and extremes. And so if you listen to the loudest voices, you put those moderate members at risk. But if you don't listen to those voices on the extremes, they may challenge incumbents in primaries. They may refuse to support you in the upcoming election. Again, that's where the money is. That's where the volunteers are. So it's a it's a very difficult situation. And, you know, in Pelosi's case, for the most part, she's decided to go with we're going to just pass what we can, even if it puts moderates at risk. And that breeds resentment from moderates saying, you know, why? Why am I here? If I'm going to get railroaded, I'm going to lose in the next election. So in theory, McCarthy's going to have the same problem with the moderates in his party, saying, as she said, why are we voting on these extreme measures that my constituents don't want? It's a very tough situation to be in as a leader.

Ron Hansen We've already made clear this movement last week was not, strictly speaking, the Freedom Caucus. But there is an overlap there. And this is a subject that you obviously have a great deal of expertise on. Help us understand the Freedom Caucus a little better. How many people are in it? What is it that they want? What is their overarching legislative or policy agenda?

Matthew Green So the Freedom Caucus is a group of about 40 to 45 members. The membership is not publicized, so it's not clear exactly how many, but that's roughly how many the caucus has, based on my understanding, and it is first and foremost a conservative group. They are ideologically conservative for the most part, and they want to move the party, their Republican Party, further to the right, and they want to see conservative legislation get passed on the House floor and ideally get enacted into law. It's not just policy, though. They also believe that it is an acceptable tool to challenge party leaders, either their election for leadership or their agenda setting power. Things like the special rule that did not pass last week. And so that gives them a leverage. That gives them leverage over leaders. So that willingness to challenge leaders, coupled with conservative policy goals, is kind of a trademark of the Freedom Caucus and has been since it was founded in 2015. Now, the group has sometimes moved away from classic conservatism. When Trump was elected, they allied themselves very closely with the kind of Trump wing of the party. And you do see members like Marjorie Taylor GREENE and Lauren Boebert, who ascribe to that more conservative populism approach to politics. But generally, those that's what kind of unites the caucus. Now, one of the things as important as the caucus is, I'd argue they've been very important in understanding House politics. They don't agree on everything all the time. And the fact that we had 11 members of the House voting against this rule and not 40, and that not every member who voted against it is a member of the Freedom Caucus shows us that it is not a unified group. Some of Kevin McCarthy's biggest supporters are from the Freedom Caucus, like Marjorie Taylor GREENE, a congresswoman from Georgia, Jim Jordan, who's a very widely respected member in conservative circles and one of the founders of the Freedom Caucus. They didn't go along with these rebels. They support McCarthy. So the group is not uniform. But when they do agree and they act as a bloc, they can be very, very influential in what happens in the House of Representatives.

Ron Hansen So what is the profile of the typical Freedom Caucus member, if we can describe them that way? And how is that different than the typical House Republican? More broadly, is there something about the characteristics of their district or their ideological views as we understand them? What is it that distinguishes them from their other Republican colleagues?

Matthew Green Well, again, they're not a unified group or a uniform, but to the extent there is some similarities there, I would say that your typical House Freedom Caucus member is more conservative, tends towards the conservative end of the spectrum, usually comes from a safe or fairly safe congressional district. So they're winning by, you know, 57%, 60% or more in a general election. Their constituents tend to be more conservative. They tend to have voted a larger percentage for Donald Trump in the last two presidential cycles. In some cases, I think it's less so now. But certainly early in its history, they also tended to be members who were less mainstream. And I don't mean that ideologically, but sort of less interested in pursuing a classic legislative or political career where, you know, to get along. You go along, as the saying goes. A former speaker, Sam Rayburn, once said, they tended sometimes to be either kind of misfits or just sort of eccentric, unusual type members. They didn't really fit in. And so I don't think that's common among all Freedom Caucus members, but I think some of them find the caucus appealing because it's a place where they can meet other like minded folks and feel frankly, more comfortable socially as opposed to joining some of the other caucuses that you have in the House or trying to traditional going up the traditional leadership ladder. You know, they're just different in that respect. And I think that's one of the things that a number of members of Freedom Caucus have in common.

Ron Hansen You mentioned history a moment ago. Does every generation have its upstarts? The Freedom Caucus seems like the successors to the Tea Party from the Obama era. We also had the class of 94 Republicans, some of whom ultimately made life difficult for then-Speaker Newt Gingrich, as you alluded to. Where does the Freedom Caucus stack up in that sort of hierarchy of organizations that have made life difficult for their own majorities, whether it's on the left or the right?

Matthew Green You're absolutely right to point out that this is not the first time that we have a group of members who are upstarts who challenge their leaders. This goes back many, many, many years. In fact, if we go back a century Speaker Joe Cannon, who was a Republican from Illinois, he often had upstarts in his party that he had to deal with who came in with a different ideological view, their younger, more junior members. They don't accept the status quo. So this is not uncommon. And there are plenty of examples in history the Democrats had to deal with the so-called squad, know Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez of New York. Before that, in the 1980s, there was a group formed called the Conservative Opportunity Society by then backbencher Newt Gingrich, which was also members who were more conservative and unhappy with the status quo with their leadership. In that respect, the Freedom Caucus is just the latest example of younger members who are upset with their leaders. Having said that, I think what distinguishes the Freedom Caucus from these other groups is first of. They're organized. So in many cases, like younger members with Newt Gingrich, they didn't form a formal organization. But the Freedom Caucus is a formal organization with a set of bylaws. The second thing is that they adopted a binding rule where if 80% of the members agree on something, everyone in the group has to vote that way on the House floor. These are very rare in House history, and it is an example of how the caucus wanted to really use leverage, create leverage against leadership. And then the fact that the membership is secret is also unusual. And initially no one wanted to say they were in the Freedom Caucus because they were afraid of retaliation from party leaders. Whereas generally in the past, upstarts are not afraid to do that because they say, look, I have nothing to lose. My constituents want me to to advertise myself where they weren't afraid of retaliation. So in some ways, the Freedom Caucus is just the latest incarnation of junior members unhappy with the status quo and wanting to change things. But in other ways they are unusual. And I think that also helps explain why they've been so influential in congressional politics since they were formed in the mid 20 tens.

Ron Hansen Arizona's Andy Biggs has been involved in the latest action, holding up regular voting in the House. He headed the Freedom Caucus for a few years. Arizona also has Representative Paul Gosar, Eli Crane, Debbie Lesko and David Schweikert, all of whom have been members of the Freedom Caucus. Former Congressman Matt Salmon was a founding member of the group in 2015. Why does Arizona have so many members of this group that is considered by many as the most far right group in the house?

Matthew Green Well, it's a great question. And I don't know there's a single answer to that. Why Arizona seems to have so many a disproportionate number of members who have been or are members of the Freedom Caucus. You know, leaving aside the possibility that it's just individual personalities, it's possible that it is reflective of the kind of conservatism that Arizona is known for thinking about. If we go back to Barry Goldwater and his presidential run and this idea that the Republican Party is not a kind of traditional, slow moving institution, but one where you've got activists, it's got a sort of libertarian streak to it. You're not afraid to challenge the status quo. That aspect of Republican politics in Arizona may help explain why a group like the Freedom Caucus is so appealing and also may explain why Arizona has at the state level, has a Freedom Caucus with

members in both the House and Senate who originally started in the House. And it's actually one of the I would argue, based on the research that I've done, one of the most influential state level freedom caucuses graduate student at University of Maryland. And I have done some research on these state Freedom caucuses and the Arizona State Freedom Caucus. It's one of the largest as a percentage of members of the party. It's big enough to be a swing vote so it can decide how votes go on the House floor if they choose to vote with Democrats. And they've been very active both in social media and in internally, in what the legislatures are doing, House and Senate, what their agenda is. And so so you have this interesting relationship between the conservatism of Arizona and the kind of Republicanism you see there to activism in the U.S. House by joining the House Freedom Caucus and leading the Freedom Caucus to now the same kind of dynamic happening in the state legislature.

Ron Hansen I want to throw out one other name that I would ask you to ponder in the effect that it has in sort of reinforcing the Freedom Caucus agenda. Kari Lake, who has run for governor here, lost. She won't concede defeat and is still on a national platform as a potential vice presidential candidate or a potential Senate candidate still in court, challenging trying to overturn her election loss for the governor's race. She last week made some fairly incendiary comments regarding President Trump's indictment. She seems to have outsized influence, not just here in Arizona, obviously, but in sort of setting a tone for what is allowable for conservatives to say and and express on these things in a state like Arizona. I have to imagine that has some downstream effects on what candidates can adopt in both their rhetoric and their positions.

Matthew Green So we do see these kind of figures at the state level, like Carrie Lake, who sort of mimic the Trump approach to politics, a kind of smash mouth approach where you say provocative things, you attack the other side in ways that traditionally you wouldn't do. You make claims that are either conspiratorial or kind of far out there. They often don't really succeed very well politically. So in Pennsylvania, for example, the Republican. And candidate for governor was just exactly the same way. But he did so poorly in the campaign and was, you know, not really widely supported within his own party, that his influence was fairly minimal. What you have with Carrie Lake, though, is you've got somebody who seems to be more savvy at using social media and garnering attention. And, of course, has Trump's strong support. And I would note it's also it's Arizona is a purple state. It's a state where it is not clear that Democrats will win statewide. Republicans can do it. And so you combine those things together and then someone like Kari Lake can have a great deal of influence. So I guess what I'd say is that, you know, Arizona is not the only state where you've got these kind of Trump like figures who try to get attention. But for whatever reason, Terry Lake's been successful at that. And that undoubtedly does further encourage, encourage lawmakers at the state level to either join the Freedom Caucus or support Freedom Caucus. It encourages possibly voters, primary voters who might say, I'm only going to vote for somebody who takes these same positions is Kari Lake or is the same kind of figure publicly. And so you add that to the mix and yeah, you can have this kind of self-reinforcing environment where a kind of Trumpian Freedom Caucus type politics becomes significant, if not dominant in the state party.

Ron Hansen One last question. We all survived the debt ceiling showdown for the next two years. I guess there's the possibility of a government shutdown if the Congress cannot come to terms on annual budget matters. How does any of this affect ordinary Americans? And is there anything else on the horizon that could directly affect people because of this ongoing division within the GOP?

Matthew Green The U.S. Congress has a pretty important agenda coming up, things that they're going to have to deal with. So even though we've made it through the debt limit crisis, we have things like the annual appropriations bills that must be enacted every year for government to continue to operate. And if those aren't enacted, then we can have partial or full shutdowns where the government ceases to function. We've been through these multiple times and we've seen their effects. It means parks can be closed, people can't get their passports. Theresa may not get their benefits. Veterans may not get their benefits. The effects can be pretty substantial. So it's important that the House and Senate and the president find a way to fund the government. There are also other bills. There's a farm bill which reauthorizes federal farm programs. There's the reauthorization of the FAA. So dealing with airports, airport policy, very important. These and other things aren't things that Congress has a choice about. They have to act. They have to legislate. That's where the danger here is for McCarthy is that he has gotten through the debt limit. He has this crisis issue right now with a rule. But again, as you said, a very narrow majority. And these are not going to be easy issues to deal with. They're going to require compromise because the Democrats have a majority in the Senate and Biden is president. He's a Democrat. And so compromise is going to be necessary and he'll have to deal with this all over again. How do you persuade the most conservative members of your party to go along with compromise? It's not going to be easy. And if he's unable to do it, the consequences for the United States and for your typical American citizen are going to be significant.

Ron Hansen Matthew Green, thank you for taking the time to discuss all this with us. If people want to follow your work online or on social media, where can they find you?

Matthew Green You can find me at the Catholic University of America website. If you go to the Department of Politics, you'll find me there and you can click on on on me on the page and go to my website and learn more about the work I've done and I'm working on now.

Ron Hansen Very good. Thanks so much for your time.

Matthew Green Thanks for having me.

Ron Hansen That is it for today gaggle listeners. Do you have questions you want us to answer or topics you'd like us to cover? Reach out to us at the gaggle at Arizona Republic dot com. That's one word all spelled out. Or call us at 6024440804. If you like the show, please leave us a review and share it with a friend to ensure you never miss an episode. Follow the gaggle on your favorite podcast app and you can follow me on Twitter at Ronald J Hansen. That's h-a-n-s-e-n. Today's episode was edited and produced by Amanda Luberto. You can follow her on Twitter at Amanda Luberto. That's l-u-b-e-r-t-o. Thanks for listening to the gaggle, a podcast from the Arizona Republic and AC Central dot com. We'll see you next week.