

Note to Boehner: End 'Business as Usual'

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Only a week after the historic trouncing of Democrats in the House of Representatives, GOP House leaders seem to be forgetting why they won.

Already, GOP chiefs are divvying up key committee chairmanships with the same people who ran things last time 'round jockeying to get their power back.

If that happens, voters who supported Republican candidates to rein in the cost of government will be defeated after the election by the seniority system and cronyism.

Tea party candidates promised voters they'd end profligate spending, earmarks, and political deal-making. The GOP lost control of the House four years ago in no small part because voters had come to doubt the party's commitment to controlling spending.

This year, voters were outraged enough at Democrats' overspending to give Republicans another chance. But the party chiefs may blow it.

One of the most powerful jobs in the House is to chair the Appropriations Committee, which divides up billions of dollars of federal funds. It's the favor factory. Appropriators rise to top leadership positions in both parties because they decide whose pet projects get funded.

By definition, reining in federal spending means reining in the appropriators' power.

The leading contender for Appropriations Committee chair is Rep. Jerry Lewis of California, a prototype of the lifelong politician. He's been in Congress 32 years. He rose to the chairmanship in 2005 and stayed on as ranking minority member when the GOP lost the House in 2006. Worse still, he's a spendaholic.

Under GOP House rules, Lewis shouldn't be able to retain his party's top slot on the committee for more than three terms, but Lewis is expected to ask for a waiver — and likely will get it.

Such decisions are made by the Republican House Steering Committee, whose chairman, Rep. John Boehner, will become speaker of the House in January.

Boehner will call most of the shots and gets five votes on the Steering Committee. Generally

chairmanships are meted out based on seniority and popularity: who raises the most money for GOP candidates, toes the party line, etc. Ugh!

Even so, the Steering Committee is supposed to abide by term limits. After their big takeover of the House in 1994, Republicans imposed term limits on chairmanships, making good on a key promise of their Contract With America and ensuring that the message the voters had sent in the 1994 election upheaval would have an impact on what actually occurred in the House.

Now, as then, opening House leadership positions to newer members is vital to changing Congress' pro-spending ways. Term limits are meaningless, if they can be overridden by cronies.

The prospect of getting a waiver is the ultimate incentive for a chairman to dispense costly favors, in utter disregard of taxpayers or the federal debt. That's just what Rep. Jerry Lewis has done again and again, consistently voting against limits on spending.

GOP newcomers in Congress should jump all over this. To rein in spending, they should demand that the Appropriations Committee be handed over to a serious cost-cutter.

The American Conservative Union is gathering signatures from tea party members and other political activists on a letter putting Boehner on notice that handing the chairmanship to Lewis will have deadly consequences for the Republican Party.

The letter warns: "If you now give a waiver to allow the old Chairman to continue, it would be a signal to the millions of independents and members of the tea party movement who took a chance on Republicans in the election, that you have ignored their message of change, and that instead it will be business as usual in Washington."

At last February's Conservative Political Action Conference, Boehner was asked how he'd handle the tea partiers if he became speaker. He promised to listen to them and open the House to their influence: "I'll pledge to you right here, right now, that we're going to run the House differently."

We'll soon see if he's ready to keep that promise.

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