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Shift puts Stefanik, Gibson on spot

Boehner exit likely pushes House rightward; less-conservative New Yorkers have to adapt

By Dan Freedman, Hearst Newspapers Published 8:44 pm, Tuesday, September 29, 2015



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WASHINGTON, DC - SEPTEMBER 29: (L-R) U.S House Majority Leader Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), House Majority Whip Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA) and Speaker of the House Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) leave after they spoke to members of the media September 29, 2015 at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC. House Republicans met to discuss GOP agenda including the government funding bill. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images) ORG XMIT: 581965395

Washington

The exit of Speaker **John Boehner** and the impending rightward shift of the House or Representatives cannot be welcome news for non-confrontational Republican conservatives such as Reps. **Chris Gibson** and **Elise Stefanik**.

To be sure, the Boehner departure and the resulting seismic jolts on Capitol Hill are catching these two center-minded lawmakers at widely varying snapshot moments in their political careers.

Gibson, R-Kinderhook, a retired Army colonel in his third term, is a short-timer who will not run for re-election in 2016 in order to position himself for a possible gubernatorial bid in 2018.

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Stefanik, R-Willsboro, a 31-year-old North Country freshman, has in eight months found herself at odds many times with the tea party wing of her party. Although the game of musical chairs to see who succeeds who is not yet complete, the resulting cast of leadership characters may not be overly receptive to Stefanik's self-described "big-tent, new-generation" Republican outlook.

"She's a national star in a way, but there's also potential for a train wreck," said **Gerald Benjamin**, director of a new public

policy center at SUNY New Paltz that bears his name. "Her job is extremely hard, but to the degree that 30 to 40 hard-core Republicans are driving the bus over the cliff, those who jump off or say 'hey, there's a cliff over there' are going to benefit. I'm not thinking she has to radically change course, and it's not in her character or interest to do so."

Stefanik had a good working relationship with House Republican leadership under Boehner, and that could continue if, as expected, House Majority Leader **Kevin McCarthy**, R-Calif., becomes speaker.

McCarthy, through his leadership PAC and personal campaign funds, has donated \$14,000 to Stefanik for the 2016 election and gave \$7,000 for the 2014 election, her first. And in June, McCarthy joined Stefanik and Gibson in New York City for a \$1,000-a-plate fundraiser for New York's **Republican State Committee**.

But McCarthy will be under increasing pressure from the tea partyers who essentially drove Boehner from office because of Boehner's willingness to compromise with **Democrats** and avoid government shutdowns.

And McCarthy's move upward opens up the key position he now holds — House majority leader — to an ultraconservative firebrand such as Rep. **Steve Scalise**, R-La., the current majority whip, or Rep. **Trey Gowdy**, R-S.C., who is heading the controversial House inquiry on then-Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton's** handling of the 2012 Benghazi attack that took the life of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, **Chris Stevens**.

Both Gibson and Stefanik have stuck their necks out for convictions not shared by their brinkmanship-prone colleagues. Gibson earlier this month proposed a GOP climate-change resolution, saying the threat is man-made and requires concerted action — a position at variance with GOP climate-change deniers.

Although generally anti-abortion, Stefanik helped derail a Republican move to bar abortions after 20 weeks except in rare circumstances. And in February, Stefanik also stood with her North Country's multitude of **Border Patrol** agents and other **Department of Homeland Security** personnel against Republicans who tried to tie departmental funding to language nullifying President **Barack Obama's** immigration initiative (which is now tied up in court).

With Republicans threatening a shutdown Sept. 30 prior to

Boehner's departure, Stefanik has decried the tactic as "theatrics" and urged colleagues to "avoid repeating the mistakes of the past."

Republicans are preparing to pass temporary spending measures to roll back the deadline. Their aim is to defund Planned Parenthood in the wake of edited videos that Republicans claim are evidence of the organization profiting from sales of fetal tissue. Both Gibson and Stefanik voted in favor of a House defunding measure Sept. 18.

On Tuesday, Stefanik co-sponsored a measure to keep paychecks flowing to military uniformed and civilian personnel in the event of a shutdown. Fort Drum, which is in her district, is home to about 25,000 soldiers and DOD civilians.

"The Republican caucus understands what she has to do in her district to win," said **Larry Sabato**, director of the **University of Virginia's Center for Politics**. "If they have any sense, they'll cut her some slack."

Ultimately, say political experts, the wisest course for Gibson and Stefanik is to avoid the crossfire, turn the volume down and stay true to the New York Republicans' center-right tradition.

"The center of the national party is moving right but the center of the New York party hasn't moved," said Benjamin. "Those Republicans getting elected are not the **Nelson Rockefeller** kind, but they're not hard-core conservative Republicans either."

dan@hearstdc.com

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