

HUFFPOST POLITICS

Blaming the Tea Party-Controlled GOP for Sequestration Isn't Partisan, It's Factual

By Mitchell Bard

The Republican policy position on sequestration is, on the surface, seemingly irrational.

There is near universal agreement that the deep cuts from the sequester that are due to take place in a few days will be damaging to the economy, costing in the neighborhood of a million jobs (based on a nonpartisan estimate) and threatening our economic recovery (the Congressional Budget Office estimates growth to be reduced by 0.6 percent). But the Republicans in Congress are nevertheless willing to take the pocketbooks of the American people hostage, all to try and ransom spending and entitlement cuts that would, in the opinion of many economists, cause further economic damage to all but the wealthiest Americans (Paul Krugman does a good job explaining this point).

So why are the Republicans doing it? After all, a majority of voters just three-and-a-half months ago rejected the very economic policies the Republicans are blackmailing the country to implement. President Obama got nearly five million more votes than Mitt Romney (and 126 more electoral votes), the Democrats picked up two seats in the U.S. Senate in a year in which the Democrats had far more seats to defend, and Democratic House candidates received more votes than Republicans. There would seem to be no argument for the Republicans to threaten the country over rejected policies.

It is easy to blame the Republican members of the House and Senate for not getting the message. Other than some cosmetic moves (sending Marco Rubio out for the State of the Union rebuttal, for example), nothing has changed (Rubio espoused the same anti-government, fact-challenged rhetoric the voters rejected in November).

But the decision of Republicans in Congress to continue an ideology-first, country-second approach to governing is, in its own way, extremely logical, even calculating. Thanks to gerrymandering, a large amount of Republican House members represent solidly red districts, so they have little to fear from a Democratic challenger, nor do senators in solid red states. But the same cannot be said about competition from the Tea Party right.

The fear is not abstract. The Tea Party has routinely challenged Republican incumbents, even staunchly conservative ones, who even emitted a whiff of being somewhat reasonable. Conservative standard-bearer Orrin Hatch narrowly survived a Tea Party challenge last year. Hatch wasn't as fortunate as his fellow conservative from Utah, Bob Bennett, who lost to his primary challenger in 2010, just as conservative Indiana senator Richard Lugar lost in 2012 to the now infamous Richard Mourdock, he of rape from pregnancy "is something that God intended to happen" fame. The Tea Party primary challenge has become such a threat to mainstream Republicans that Karl Rove started the Conservative Victory Project to help GOP incumbents ward off less electable primary opponents.

When you consider how few people actually vote in midterm primaries (voter turnout for the 2010 primaries was only 17.8 percent), it means a narrow slice of the population, residing on the far right of the political spectrum, is dictating how Republicans in Congress are proceeding. No wonder John Boehner is insisting on cuts to entitlements and other programs mainly aimed at working and middle class Americans, all while protecting the wealthy from any tax increases, to avert sequestration. A big chunk of his caucus is made up Tea Party ideologues, and the rest are in danger of being primaried if they don't do the Tea Party's bidding.

So what is the result of all this madness?

Well, for one, the Republican party, at a federal level, has become a toxic brand. Beyond the election losses in November, polling data shows that the majority of the American people are not with the GOP. According to a recent Bloomberg poll, only 35 percent have a positive image of Republicans (the same poll shows a 55 percent approval rating for the president), and only 44 percent believe the GOP policy of cutting spending and taxes--the thing Republicans say is so important they will blackmail the country to get it -- will create more jobs than the infrastructure investments proposed by the president.

But more importantly, Republicans in the House and Senate, afraid of primary challenges and, in some cases, the product of them, have handed their party over to the lunatic fringe. They have placed a purist, anti-government, anti-taxes, pro-wealthy, anti-middle class, Ayn Randian ideal above the practical, compromising, hard work of actually governing. They have created a toxic atmosphere in Washington, in which damaging the country (again, we are talking about a million people losing their jobs) is preferable to working with a president they irrationally despise and compromising to move even an inch closer to where the majority of voters stand on the issues.

Simply put, the Tea Party-controlled Republicans in Congress are driving us over an economic cliff.

Until we get away from the "blame everyone," "it's both sides" false equivalency of shying away from telling the truth about the GOP's suicide mission, pretending the same thing is happening on both sides (David Brooks's pathetic attempt to draw a false equivalency was so loathsome, he felt the need to walk back his characterization of the president's position the next day), the dysfunction in Washington will continue.

The only way things will get better is if we cast off the fear of seeming partisan and let the truth and facts drive the debate.

The bottom line is that the Republicans are demanding spending cuts that were soundly rejected by the voters in November, and to get them, they are threatening to allow the sequestration cuts to go forward, which will be bad for the American people. (Let's remember that the sequestration cuts are the result of the Republicans holding the country hostage last year over the debt ceiling.) And a major driving force behind the Republicans' refusal to compromise--again, against the wishes of a majority of Americans--is a fear of losing their seats to Tea Party challengers. Which means we, as a country, are being held hostage by a small number of far-right ideologues whose views have been rejected, again and again, by a majority of voters (and not just by Democrats, when you consider GOP losses in red state Senate races like Indiana and Missouri).

If the sequester goes forward, and the country pays the price, everyone has a responsibility to stand up and point a finger at the reason for our government's epic dysfunction. If John Boehner, Mitch McConnell and their Republican colleagues in the House and Senate have any sense at all, they'll duck at that moment. Because this fabricated, unnecessary national disaster will be on them and their inability/lack of desire to do what is best for Americans, not what is best for the Tea Party.
