

Boehner's move

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Policy makers in Washington have long dreamed of a fiscal grand bargain on taxes and spending. The end of the year instead saw a rather humble bargain: a small-bore budget deal that avoids the big issues and does little to get the economy back on track.

But the budget-deal process did produce one grand outcome: GOP House Speaker John Boehner finally stood up to the insurgent right. Boehner called his hard-line colleagues out publicly, and he delivered the votes for a bipartisan bill.

Boehner has always been more interested in governing than in lobbying ideological bombs. The question has been how much control he has over the avid bomb-lobbers in his own caucus—and how willing he is to take them on. Is this feistier Boehner the new normal? If so, the chamber he presides over may actually pass some meaningful legislation in 2014. Here are some issues to watch:

- Unemployment insurance. On December 28, 1.3 million Americans will lose their unemployment benefits. The budget deal did nothing to alleviate this, and Senate Democrats plan to start with this issue in 2014. Boehner says he wants spending cuts in exchange for more unemployment benefits.

- The debt ceiling. The federal government will reach its borrowing limit again in the spring. If Boehner is newly serious about governing, he'll avoid another episode of the pointless debt-ceiling brinksmanship that has defined the last couple years of American politics.
- The farm bill. The House and Senate have failed to find a compromise on the omnibus bill. The biggest sticking point is food stamps, which many House Republicans want to cut deeply. Boehner could likely pass a bipartisan bill with much smaller cuts—if he's willing to bring it to the floor. This would require him to break the Hastert Rule, under which Republican Speakers only allow votes on bills that the majority of Republican members support. Boehner has broken this rule before, but rarely.
- The Employment Non-Discrimination Act. This longtime LGBT priority almost certainly has the bipartisan votes, but it too would require Boehner to break the Hastert Rule. ENDA has 201 cosponsors in the House. When the Senate passed it in November, ten GOP senators voted aye.
- Immigration. Comprehensive immigration reform may depend on Boehner's willingness to pass it with a bipartisan majority. Boehner has sent mixed signals here on whether he would consider that.

It's not clear that any of these issues will be addressed in 2014, and the fact that it is an election year does not help the odds. It is clear, however, that Boehner is in the best position to keep Congress moving. Government gridlock often gets blamed on intransigence all around, but the current impasse is not between the two parties but within one of them: the GOP is divided between those who want to govern and those who seek only to obstruct. Will the House leader lead?