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Tea Party Tally

Why senators are avoiding the Tea Party Caucus

Some tea party favorites stayed away from the Thursday's meeting of the new Senate Tea Party Caucus, as newly elected Republicans try to define themselves in Washington.



JoAnn Abbott, co-organizer for Washington D.C. Tea Party, speaks to reporters at the Senate Tea Party Caucus on Capitol Hill in Washington, Jan. 27.

(Charles Dharapak / AP)

By Patrik Jonsson, Staff writer

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The reluctance of tea party favorites like Sen. Marco Rubio (R) of Florida and Sen. Ron Johnson (R) of Wisconsin to join a new Senate Tea Party Caucus points to the difficulty some incoming Republicans face in adjusting to the political realities of the Beltway while retaining the tea party bona fides they earned on the campaign trail.

Last year's House Tea Party Caucus had 50 members – this year's rolls haven't been released yet – but only four senators appeared before a throng of tea party supporters for the first meeting of the Senate Tea Party Caucus on Jan. 27.

Why are so few tea-party-backed senators willing to align themselves with the caucus, only months after the tea party was credited with fueling a Republican takeover of the House and boosting the party's Senate numbers?

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The snub from Senators Rubio, Johnson, and others suggest that the newly elected politicians are carefully gauging the post-Tucson political winds, keenly aware that mainstream America may be tired of the kind of anti-Obama rhetoric that peppered the campaign trail and became emblematic of the small-government, anti-tax tea party movement.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Johnson hinted that his goal is broader conservative solidarity. "The reason I ran for the US Senate was to not only stop the Obama agenda but reverse it. I believe our best chance of doing that is to work towards a unified

Republican Conference, so that's where I will put my energy," said Johnson, who told the Times he had "great respect for the tea party movement."

Such careful distancing may be necessary. "Tea party supported candidates run the risk of, if they stay on the message that put them in office, alienating themselves from the political process," says Joshua Dyck, a political scientist at the State University of New York, at Buffalo.

In the wake of the Jan. 8 shootings in Tucson, Ariz., where six people were killed and Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was gravely injured, some tea party Republicans have reconsidered their alliances and appearances. The president's poll numbers rose after his Tucson speech, where he squelched laments from the left about right-wing rhetoric playing a role in the shooter's motive, while appealing to the country to "pause ... and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds."

After that speech, "tea party Republicans are now going to have a hard time finding a place in this debate, because their entire argumentative style is based on saying everything [Obama] believes is wrong and is fundamentally harming the fabric of the Republic," says Professor Dyck. "When they say those things, it doesn't sound like they're willing to engage in this sort of softer, post-partisan debate."

In addition, Tuesday's rough-around-the-edges tea party response to the State of the Union address by Rep. Michele Bachmann (R) of Minnesota raised concern among some Republicans that the tea party wing of the party could undermine a concerted conservative challenge to President Obama. In fact, at least one tea party-backed House Republican has privately said they now have reservations about joining the Bachmann-led House Tea Party Caucus.

"Invitations [to the caucus] would be viewed more favorably if it were led by someone else," one aide to a Republican lawmaker told the Times.

Tea party activists around the country are carefully watching the political calculations of Republicans calibrating their approach to issues such as cutting spending, repealing the health-care law, and finding a viable presidential candidate to challenge Obama in the next election.

"There is some concern," says Shelly Pettus, a tea party activist in Florence, Ala., "about what [senators] were thinking by not joining that caucus, but I don't know that I would say that means they're pulling back from what they were sent there to do."

Ultimately, she says, politicians' labels are less important than their actions. She says she is heartened, for example, by the House vote to repeal the Obama health-care reform law, an issue torn straight out of the tea party playbook.

"I don't care if somebody calls themselves a tea party person as long as they act like a tea party person," she says.

The four senators who have publicly joined the Senate Tea Party Caucus – Sens. Rand Paul (R) of Kentucky, Jim DeMint (R) of South Carolina, Mike Lee (R) of Utah, and Jerry Moran (R) of Kansas – offered up a new \$500 billion spending-cut plan and vowed to offer a counterweight to politics as usual. They said Thursday they plan to hold quarterly meetings to discuss issues among themselves and with constituents.

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