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By Gail Russell Chaddock

Before Congress's smackdown over FY 2011 funding, reviews of the 87-member class almost all painted the same portrait: The freshmen are tea partyers. The freshmen seek to cut government spending at all costs. The freshmen hold the speaker "hostage" and would drive the legislative process off a cliff, rather than compromise their principles, Democrats said.

With a shutdown looming, many GOP freshmen reinforced the idea that they are here precisely to shake things up. Quipped freshman Rep. Allen West (R) of Florida: "Why would I want to compromise with the incompetent, inept people who got us into this fiscal situation in the first place? And you can quote me exactly on that."

But interviews and an analysis of voting patterns in the new Congress suggest that the Republican freshman class is more diverse and pragmatic than its reputation allows.

Only 14 joined the 57-member House Tea Party Caucus, for instance. And only 33 voted for the starkest deficit-reduction plan yet forwarded in Congress – an amendment that would have returned federal spending to fiscal year 2006 levels. Moreover, GOP freshmen have sided with Democrats to block budget cuts to firefighters, the National Labor Relations Board, and renewable energy programs.

As negotiations over FY 2011 funding heated up, 21 freshmen broke with leadership on March 15 to refuse to back another stop-gap measure to avoid a government shutdown. It was time, they said, for a deal for the full year – or a fight. The measure passed, with help from Democrats. But when Speaker Boehner asked for his caucus's support for yet another stop-gap measure on Friday, all but two freshmen switched course to back him.

"I don't want to turn every skirmish into the war," says freshman Rep. Bill Huizenga (R) of

Michigan, one of the 21 who backed Boehner's call for one last short-term measure.

Many freshmen credit the willingness of the GOP leadership team to reach out and listen to their concerns. All the debate and votes over FY 2011 spending gave freshmen a voice.

"If you let people speak, and listen to them, things don't explode," says freshman Rep. Tim Griffin (R) of Arkansas.

"A lot of people give us credit for lots of things, but we have been very spread out on our voting," says Rep. Kristi Noem (R) of South Dakota, a farmer, rancher, and former assistant majority leader of the South Dakota House.

In an unusual move, Speaker John Boehner tapped her to be one of two liaisons to GOP leadership from the freshmen class.

It's not easy representing her class, she adds: "But what we all agree on is that we should cut spending."

Also shared among the 87 is the insistence that the voter mandate that sent them to Congress was a mandate to change how Washington works.

"The American people sent us here because they wanted change in Washington," says Rep. Marlin Stutzman (R) of Indiana, the owner of a farm-trucking company, who served eight years as a state legislator. "We have to stick to our principles and do what the American people want."

Since coming to Washington, the freshmen have faced a blizzard of votes on issues ranging from the repeal of health-care reform to historic cuts across vast areas of domestic spending – all while assembling a congressional staff and still learning to navigate the Capitol's underground tunnels. Like newcomers before them, they're stunned by the pace of the work, but also at how long it takes to make changes.

"Speed is fast, but nothing changes," says freshman Rep. Tim Scott (R) of South Carolina, commenting on what he has learned in his first three months in Congress.

While their impact on the House is formidable by the numbers – they comprise one-fifth of the House and more than one-third of House Republicans – the freshmen are still on a learning curve. More than half have no previous legislative experience, and more than one-third have never held political office.

Many freshmen note with surprise that the Senate can ignore House votes on issues ranging from the repeal of health-care reform to spending cuts. The spending bill to fund the balance of this fiscal year, which the House spent days crafting and amending, for example, was at first summarily dismissed by the Senate.

"It's frustrating that we can't get the Senate to respond," says freshman Rep. James Lankford (R) of Oklahoma, whose previous experience includes a mastery of biblical languages and 14 years directing programs for the nation's largest Baptist youth camp.

He says that he is aware of the criticism that the freshmen don't understand the ways of Washington, especially the art of compromise, but says that the nation's fiscal situation is so extreme that strong measures are needed.

"Some people define compromise as, 'I sacrifice my principles,' " he says. He's alarmed that "the Senate won't consider cutting \$62 billion," despite the fact that estimates of the budget shortfall for the current fiscal year have increased more than \$250 billion since he arrived Jan. 5.

"We're off here in uncharted territory," he adds.

To reach a budget deal, House Republican leaders initially proposed \$32 billion in spending cuts – the most dramatic cut in domestic discretionary spending since-World War II. But party

conservatives, including most freshmen, pushed to roll back spending to pre-Obama levels – a

campaign pledge – by cutting \$62 billion. That spending bill passed Feb. 19 by a vote of 235 to 189, with all GOP freshmen voting in favor.

But the GOP freshmen splintered over whether to cut spending further still. Over the opposition of most Republican Party leaders, 60 of 87 freshmen backed an amendment to cut an additional \$22 billion in spending for FY 2011 – slashing funding for the legislative branch by 11 percent and cutting 5.5 percent across the-board for most other nondefense spending. The measure failed, 147 to 281, with 92 Republicans and all Democrats voting in opposition.

An amendment for more-severe cuts, which would have brought spending back to FY 2006 levels, received only 33 freshman votes. The measure failed with 93 "yes" votes, meaning that freshmen did not support it any more or less than other Republicans.

Other amendments to the House budget bill also offered a more nuanced portrait of House freshmen.

- Thirty GOP freshmen broke with the majority of their party to increase funding for the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program by \$298 million.
- Twenty-four GOP freshmen voted to preserve post-9/11 firefighter-hiring grants.
- In a move that surprised labor activists, 25 GOP freshmen voted with Democrats to block a tea party-led amendment to strike \$233.4 million in funding for salaries and expenses at the National Labor Relations Board, which investigates unfair labor practices.
- Breaking with many conservatives in their own ranks, 36 GOP freshmen opposed an amendment that would have cut \$70 million from the Department of Energy's renewable-energy programs.

These expressions of partisan independence were possible because, in many cases, House Speaker Boehner has not leaned on members of the Republican caucus to vote as a unified bloc.

"The hardest part about all the amendments was that they came so many at a time," said freshman Rep. Mike Kelly (R) of Pennsylvania, who voted to protect funding on all these items, after consulting the needs of his district. "Trying to research them and come up with what we thought was best for the district – that's the hard part."

A car dealer in Butler, Pa., Mr. Kelly opted to run for Congress in 2009 after the Obama administration's Auto Task Force announced plans to shut down more than 1,900 dealerships, including Mike Kelly Chevrolet-Cadillac Inc. The freshmen are bringing a lot of practical experience to the table, he says.

"A lot of what's standard practice here would never work in the outside world," he says. "People don't trust their government because the Congress has packaged too many bad things and sold them with good things. My feeling is: If it's so good, why doesn't it stand on its own?"

But he says that he's open to compromise on what to cut and how quickly to do it.

"We're going to cut the size of government, we're going to reduce spending, we're going to start to get this deficit under control," he says. But it has to be done with care. "I should probably lose another 30 or 40 pounds, but I can't do it by this weekend."

Still, many freshmen insist that the fights to come on the FY 2012 budget and raising the national debt limit will be tougher, and a government shutdown harder to avoid.

"If we can't get people [in the Senate] to change their mentality when we're at the edge of a cliff, so be it," says Congressman Stutzman, the former Indiana state legislator. "The government is going to shut down sooner or later. [Without cuts], the government is going to implode. We can

make changes now, or the natural laws of economics are going to make them for us."

Many freshmen report that they are getting heat from constituents on the glacial pace of change in Washington.

"When I'm back home, tea party folks are telling me: 'You're not doing enough and doing it fast enough,' " says Rep. Blake Farenthold (R) of Texas, a lawyer and former disc jockey who owns a computer consulting firm. "I've got to be able to go home and look at the folks who voted for me and say: 'I got the best deal for you that I could.' "