

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

CRUZ'S POWER TO DISRUPT FACES A FRESH TEST

By Janet Hook
December 7, 2014

It is a classic Ted Cruz moment: The Capitol this week is poised for a fight over government spending and immigration, and the Texas Republican senator has seized the moment to bash his party leaders' strategy and rail against Washington.

Last year, Mr. Cruz led the charge in a similar battle over health-care funding that resulted in a government shutdown. This time, with his party poised to become Congress' governing majority, he's having a more difficult time getting other Republicans to follow his lead.

A hero of the tea-party movement, Mr. Cruz has encouraged House Republicans to oppose Speaker John Boehner's plan to fund the government beyond Thursday unless it also blocks President Barack Obama's immigration initiative. That bill is expected to pass despite conservative objections.

GOP leaders in the Senate, meanwhile, haven't embraced Mr. Cruz's other strategy. He wants to block Senate action on most executive branch and judicial nominations until the president relents on immigration. Senate GOP leaders have made clear their priority this month is to avoid any kind of government shutdown.

"I'm going to make sure the government is open and functioning," said Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY), chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee. GOP leadership aides in the Senate are hoping that Mr. Cruz will prove to be "an army of one."

Many Republicans want to postpone any immigration battle until next year when a new Congress convenes with Republicans controlling both chambers. Mr. Cruz doesn't buy that argument and told reporters after a rally last week that he expects to find many in his party still reluctant to take on Mr. Obama next year.

"Even with a Republican House and Senate, the same folks who are saying 'Gosh, we can't do anything now,' in January are going to say, 'Gosh, we don't have 60 votes in the Senate,'" he said. "It's like Charlie Brown and Lucy where constantly the same voices pull the football aside."

This week presents a test of how hard Mr. Cruz is willing to push. If the House passes a funding bill that doesn't seek to block the immigration initiative, which protects millions of undocumented immigrants from deportation, he could try to force a vote on the issue.

He can't block the bill with a filibuster without at least the support of 40 colleagues. Time will be tight: Government funding expires Thursday; the House isn't expected to approve it until Wednesday.

Even if Mr. Cruz's in-your-face strategy is losing favor on Capitol Hill, it is helping to raise his profile as he and a wide field of potential Republican candidates consider the possibility of running for their party's presidential nomination in 2016.

The Texan is positioning himself as the most anti-Congress member of Congress in the field, the conservative's conservative. This poses a risk for party leaders as they try during the next two years to show that the GOP can make government work.

Mr. Cruz has called on Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), when he becomes majority leader in January, to block all Obama nominations, except "vital" national-security posts, until the president drops his immigration policy. Mr. McConnell hasn't responded to the proposal.

Senate Minority Whip John Cornyn (R-TX) said last week he believed nominations should be considered on a "case by case basis."

The House will vote this week on a bill to provide a full year of funding for most agencies. The Homeland Security Department, which oversees immigration policy, would get funding only until early 2015 to allow Republicans to revisit immigration after they take control of the Senate. Mr. Cruz argues that funding Mr. Obama's immigration policy for even a few months violates a pledge to block the president's "amnesty."

"Doing what you promised doesn't mean, as it so often does in Washington, sending a really stern letter and having a meaningless show vote," Mr. Cruz said last week at the rally that included tea-party activists.

Mr. Cruz had met earlier in the day, as he does on a regular basis, with a group of the House's most conservative members and urged opposition to the Boehner plan. It is reminiscent of the fight Mr. Cruz and his conservative allies led a year ago to cut off funding for the 2010 health-care law. That effort failed and led to a partial government shutdown many voters blamed on Republicans.

Some Senate Republicans say they see signs that Mr. Cruz is more willing to be a team player, noting that he didn't use delaying tactics to hold up a funding bill that Congress passed in September even though it included money for the health-care law. His aides won't say how far he will go and the senator said he isn't threatening a government shutdown.

"I think we should fund virtually the entire federal government," he told reporters after the rally. "But we should not be funding illegal immigration policy."