

## You're fired! Boehner succumbs to the Republican way of leadership

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

After years of threats, Republican House backbenchers have finally succeeded in effectively ousting House Speaker John Boehner.

Boehner, who announced his impending resignation on September 25, joins what once was a very small club but is now growing every few years — the list of Republican congressional leaders who have been tossed to the side by their internal party dynamics. A look at their record shows that “you’re fired” is not just the favored phrase of their party’s current presidential front-runner.

Boehner’s failure to maintain power mirrors some of recent predecessors. It is a bit surprising to see the successful coups, as the speaker of the House is easily the most powerful congressional job.

Unlike the Senate majority leader, a powerful speaker can bend the House to his will. The roles of speaker and majority or minority leader were historically so powerful that John Barry, in his book on the Jim Wright speakership, *The Ambition and the Power*, compared a successful attack on the speaker or minority leader to regicide. And yet the Republicans have been very willing to launch these broadsides against their own party leaders.

The most prominent example was former Speaker Newt Gingrich, who was credited with leading the Republicans back into the House majority after 40 years in the minority wilderness.

But when trouble came, his party faithful were quick to turn. In 1997, other top leaders, including Representative Boehner of Ohio, looked to force out Gingrich. And after a poor 1998 election showing, Gingrich resigned, even though the party maintained its majority.

The Gingrich departure wasn’t just a one-man loss. Gingrich’s most obvious replacement, Majority Leader Dick Armey, was passed over for the speakership, a big departure from the historical House practice. In 13 consecutive leadership changes, the speaker had previously held the position of either majority or minority leader (or when the minority leader retired, minority whip).

Instead, the Republicans chose Robert Livingston, who never even took the position after a sex scandal derailed his presumed ascension. The Republicans went with a junior member of the leadership team, Dennis Hastert, who held power for eight years, but didn’t run for minority leader once the party was ousted from the majority.

Even before Gingrich, the Republican House members were a very restless lot. The last Republican Speaker before Gingrich, Joe Martin (then in the role of minority leader), was kicked out by Charles Halleck, who was himself later tossed overboard by Gerald Ford.

Ford’s successor, John Rhodes, didn’t run for re-election to the post after threats by other members, and Rhodes’s successor, Robert Michel, didn’t run for re-election to Congress after Gingrich let him know that he would challenge for the leadership position. These overthrows may have had more than anything else to do with the Republicans’ perennial status as a minority party and the leader’s inability to get them back into power. But they still show a quick willingness to punish failure.

Boehner himself was a big proponent in upsetting the applecart. Not only was he a key player in the failed Gingrich coup in 1997, but also he later got back into power by defeating acting majority leader (and then-majority whip) Roy Blunt in 2006, following the resignation of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

It is only on the Republican side of the aisle that this event occurs. Though Democrats were until very recently considered the more fractious party, they have a long history of “standing by their man,” or now woman. No Democratic speaker or leader (either majority or minority) has been kicked out or left early, with the one exception of Speaker Jim Wright, who resigned due to scandal.

We can see this with Nancy Pelosi, who lost the speakership and the majority back in 2010, yet has had no trouble maintaining her job as leader despite three failed elections. Her predecessor, Dick Gephardt, maintained his job despite continual failed elections. Similarly, the party lost the House in 1946 and 1952, yet Speaker Sam Rayburn took over as the minority leader, a pattern that was started by Speaker Champ Clark when the Democrats were swept out in 1918.

Boehner’s resignation shows that while Republicans may be considered the more conservative party, they are also the one ready to pull the plug once they have a problem with a leader. Firing their speakers and legislative leaders is a regular trend for the GOP.

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