

Kevin McCarthy wrangles the tea party alligators in his caucus

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Bakersfield Republican Kevin McCarthy, who was a consultant for the Netflix political drama “House of Cards,” is more aware than anyone that the ruthless and homicidal leadership style of the fictional House whip played by Kevin Spacey does not really work anymore. Having just been chosen as the first Californian to be House majority leader, McCarthy is more likely to kill with kindness than literally kill any of his colleagues.

As marvelously dark and entertaining as “House of Cards” may be, the show’s portrayal of how politics works in Washington is seriously outdated. Spacey’s character harks back to the era when bare-knuckled leaders like Lyndon Johnson could twist arms, call in favors and threaten careers in order to put together a voting majority. That was before earmarks to bills had been eliminated and incumbents were nearly all guaranteed reelection in districts designed to tilt heavily toward one party.

These days, the greatest fear among members of the House Republican caucus is that they will lose their safe seats to upstart challengers who are even more conservative than they are. That is, of course, what happened to McCarthy’s predecessor as majority leader, Eric Cantor, who, in the recent Virginia primary, got blindsided by a tea party challenger.

It is now safest for a Republican politician to be seen bucking the system, defying leadership and posing as an outsider who hates the very idea of governing. Without earmarks, leaders have few ways to distribute rewards and line up support from reluctant junior members of the caucus. In fact, many in the tea party faction would refuse a share of the pork barrel for their constituents even if it were offered. They don’t have much interest in bringing home the bacon or passing big legislation. They see their sole job as saying no to anything that has the scent of big government, even if it is backed by the establishment of their own party.

One former House member has compared managing the current House GOP to handling a pet alligator – a beast you feed and feed, hoping for gratitude, until one day it bites off your arm.

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McCarthy may be the right guy to wrangle the alligators. Rep. Richard Hudson (R-N.C.) told The Times that McCarthy is a relationship builder. “He always keeps it fun,” Hudson said. “He reminds us the work we’re doing is serious but we don’t have to be miserable all the time.”

McCarthy favors trips to the movies, morning bike rides, dinner invitations and sharing photos as methods of building goodwill. The soft style seems to be working for him, since his rise through the ranks has been swift.

Nevertheless, being a buddy and a good-time guy might not be enough. Some caucus members to the right of the solidly conservative McCarthy are talking as if he is on probation and are anticipating another leadership vote after the congressional election in November.

The one thing working in McCarthy's favor is the similar natures of alligators and tea party Republicans: They are easily distracted by red meat and too ornery to get themselves organized.

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