

What is the Freedom Caucus?

Tony Farrell, November 16 - 18, 2023

The Republican Party of today is not my grandfather’s Republican Party. Today’s GOP has groups within the party with different goals. There are terms and names I hear tossed about on the news, and I wanted to better understand them. This is my attempt to clear things up for myself. I hope you’ll find it useful too.

The Political Spectrum

In its most basic form, the political spectrum runs from liberal, on the left, to conservative, on the right. Moderates are at the center, between the two extremes.



Democrats are generally viewed as “blue” because of their relatively liberal views, and Republicans are generally considered “red” because of their relatively conservative views. States like Texas, which tend to have Republican representation, are considered “red states”, while states like California, which tends to elect Democrat representation, are considered “blue states.”



The most liberal among the liberals are said to be at “far left”, while the most conservative among conservatives are said to be at “far right.” Notable examples are Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX).

The Republican Conference

The Republican Conference, which is comprised of Republican Congresspeople, is known to have conservative views. Each Representative’s political appetites generally fall somewhere along the right half of the political spectrum.

The Tea Party

In 2009, primarily conservative politicians and activists created a political movement calling for smaller government, reduction of the national debt and lower taxes, and advocated for an economy more dependent on market forces, without government oversight. The Tea Party steered clear of social issues like abortion and illegal immigration and worked to avoid American military involvement in foreign affairs. In 2013, Speaker of the House John Boehner fought back against Tea Party Representatives’ efforts to force the United States into default rather than raise the debt ceiling. (This was perhaps the flashpoint that created the Freedom Caucus.) The Tea Party, which at one time may have included 20% of the Republican Conference, was influential on the conference as a whole; by 2016, some of its ideals had been adopted by the conference generally – meaning The Tea Party moved the Republican Party further right.ⁱ

The Freedom Caucus

In 2015, a group of ultra-conservatives and Tea Party members formed with the goal of pushing Republican leadership further right and of ousting Speaker Boehner. A key difference

between the Freedom Caucus and the Tea Party is its willingness to engage on social issues the Tea Party avoided – abortion and immigration being perhaps the best examples.

Of notable interest in the context of 2023, The Congressman who appeared most likely to succeed Boehner as Speaker was Congressman Kevin McCarthy, the House Majority Leader, but the Freedom Caucus withheld its support.

Under the Trump Administration, the Freedom Caucus changed its focus from legislation to defense of President Trump during the Special Counsel Investigation led by Robert Mueller. President Trump later appointed two former Freedom Caucus members as his Chief of Staff: Mick Mulvaney (2019 – 2020) and Mark Meadows (2020 – 2021), highlighting the close alignment between the President and the Freedom Caucus.

After President Trump’s defeat in 2020, many Freedom Caucus members supported Trump’s attempts to overturn the election results.

Probably the biggest claim the Freedom Caucus has to fame is the infamous deposition of Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, as a function of rule changes the caucus demanded before supporting McCarthy for the position. Apart from restoring the motion to vacate the chair, the caucus also demanded an increase in representation among committee chairpersonships.

The Freedom Caucus does not disclose its members, and membership by invitation only. Its influence has grown among the Republican Conference, with an estimated 12% of House Republicans in 2016 to an estimated 21% of House Republicans in 2022. Media outlets report Congressman Scott Perry (R-NY) is the Freedom Caucus Chairman and Congressman Jim Jordan (R-OH) is its Vice-Chairman (Jordan is thought to have been Chairman when the group initially formed).ⁱⁱ

Other Factions

The America First Caucus was a splinter group that formed briefly from the Freedom Caucus in 2021, led by Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Matt Gaetz (R-FL). Later, a subset of the more radical Freedom Caucus members and Trump loyalists formed “The MAGA Squad,” a cabal which included Greene, Gosar, Gaetz, Lauren Boebert (R-CO) and others. Most notably, some of the “Squad” have fully embraced the notion of the Republican Party as “a single entity for defending the high status of white, Christian, rural Americans,” such that they have introduced legislation, public commentary, or resolutions that reflect their view.^{iii iv v vi vii viii}

Potential Effect on the PANAMA Bill

There are two members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs who are also suspected members of the Freedom Caucus. One is on the Disability and Memorial Affairs subcommittee, which has control of the PANAMA bill: Congressman Eli Crane (R-AZ). Crane promoted the conspiracy theory about fraud in the 2020 Presidential election, called upon the Arizona legislature to decertify President Biden’s victory, and upon the Attorney General of Arizona to launch a criminal investigation into alleged voter fraud. He was endorsed by former president Trump in his 2022 electoral campaign. One wonders if, through Crane and DAMA subcommittee Chairman Morgan Luttrell’s shared history as Navy SEALs, Crane’s position on spending vis-à-vis his Freedom Caucus membership may hold some sway over Luttrell, despite some difference in respective appetites for conservatism.^{ix x xi xii}

Conclusion

Now I better understand why I hear the names of these congresspeople so often, though I hadn’t understood they were working as a bloc. With roots in the Tea Party, which opposed Obama

Administration policies and initiatives, the Freedom Caucus works aggressively to grow their right-wing influence and power, pushing the Republican Conference further to the right and willing to threaten the passage of legislation (like appropriations) without favorable concessions.^{xiii} Whether the caucus holds any specific sway over the DAMA subcommittee’s ability to move the PANAMA bill forward seems in doubt. Within the Freedom Caucus is a subset of extreme Trump loyalists – personalities we’ve come to recognize as “MAGA Republicans” through media reporting – who also seek to promote social injustice.^{xiv}

ⁱ “Tea Party Caucus.” Wikipedia, 5 Oct. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_Party_Caucus.

ⁱⁱ “Freedom Caucus.” *Wikipedia*, 26 Oct. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Caucus.

ⁱⁱⁱ Representative Greene was later removed from the Freedom Caucus. See “Marjorie Taylor Greene Officially ‘Kicked Out’ of Freedom Caucus, Rep. Ken Buck Says.” *NBC News*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/marjorie-taylor-greene-officially-kicked-freedom-caucus-gop-lawmaker-s-rcna93962>.

^{iv} Bonitatibus, Steve. “A List of MAGA Republicans Who Took the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Mainstream.” *Center for American Progress Action*, 8 Sept. 2022, <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/a-list-of-maga-republicans-who-took-the-great-replacement-theory-mainstream>.

^v “Factions in the Republican Party (United States).” *Wikipedia*, 16 Nov. 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factions_in_the_Republican_Party_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factions_in_the_Republican_Party_(United_States)).

^{vi} Cousins, Farron. “Marjorie Taylor Greene Has Meltdown After Republicans Block Her Impeachment Efforts.” *YouTube*, 15 Nov. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihr5JOK1xul>.

^{vii} “Legislative Search Results -- H. Res. 610” *congress.gov*, <https://www.congress.gov/search?q=%7B%22source%22%3A%22legislation%22%2C%22search%22%3A%22h.%20res.%20610%22%7D>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2023.

^{viii} “Ranking Member DeLauro Floor Remarks on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Bill.” *House Committee on Appropriations*, 26 July 2023, democrats-appropriations.house.gov/news/statements/ranking-member-delauro-floor-remarks-on-military-construction-veterans-affairs-and. The riders Congresswoman DeLauro (D-CT) mentioned are a series of amendments proposed by Congressman Chip Roy (R-TX), a member of the Freedom Caucus, prohibiting teaching or promotion of Critical Race Theory (the idea that Western legal and social institutions inherently include racial bias, because those institutions were designed by and for whites) or any executive orders related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

^{ix} Pass The Panama Canal Zone Veterans Act. “Pass the Panama Canal Zone Veterans Act.” *Pass the Panama Canal Zone Veterans Act*, hr2447.com/take-action.

^x “Eli Crane.” *Wikipedia*, 16 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eli_Crane.

^{xi} “Morgan Luttrell.” *Wikipedia*, 3 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_Luttrell.

^{xii} Congressman Luttrell is a former member of the Republican Main Street Caucus, a caucus of centrist conservatives. More conservative caucuses like the Club for Growth deride the Main Street Caucus as being RINO – a derogatory acronym for “Republican In Name Only.” See “Republican Main Street Partnership.” *Wikipedia*, 9 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_Main_Street_Partnership and “Club for Growth.” *Wikipedia*, 16 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Club_for_Growth.

^{xiii} The removal of Congressman McCarthy from the Speaker position was a page from the Tea Party playbook, when Boehner “resigned”; in both cases, the Speaker ran afoul of the wishes of the bloc, and in both cases, the matter at hand was a continuing resolution (to fund the federal government); and in both cases, the Speaker consulted with Democrats in the interest keeping the government operating – which was contrary to the desires of the bloc.

^{xiv} The term “MAGA Republicans” does not seem exclusive to The MAGA Squad cabal; I would readily identify Congressman Jordan as a MAGA Republican even though he is not known to subscribe to the cabal’s ideals.