

Ted Cruz's Plan to Save the Internet Gains Support

Sen. Ted Cruz's latest showdown with the Obama administration over the White House plan to give up control of the internet could help bring wayward conservatives back to Republican leadership's heel on a stopgap spending measure.

Arguments about internet freedom and federal spending have become intertwined on Capitol Hill, affecting how some House conservatives say they'll vote on a short-term continuing resolution to fund the government after the fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

On Oct. 1, the Obama administration plans to relinquish control of ICANN—the global, nonprofit organization that functions as the phonebook of the internet by curating website domain names.

That's the same day that the federal government's spending authority ends.

Multiple members of the House Freedom Caucus told The Daily Signal that a policy rider stopping the internet handoff could sweeten a short-term continuing resolution that, so far, they've been loath to swallow.

Conservatives have sparred with members of the House Appropriations Committee for weeks over the length of a stopgap spending measure.

Appropriators want a three-month continuing resolution that would put government spending on autopilot until December. Conservatives balk at that option because it allows outgoing lawmakers to legislate during the lame-duck session, the period after the election but before the next Congress convenes.

Members of the Freedom Caucus have pushed for a longer, six-month continuing resolution. But if they secure policy guarantees from leadership, that could change.

A founding Freedom Caucus member, Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., said conservatives are open to supporting a short continuing resolution if two provisions are added: one pausing immigration from Syria and another “stopping the transfer of ICANN to an international entity.”

Cruz is spearheading the effort to craft the policy rider on internet control in the Senate’s version of the short-term budget measure.

The Texas senator has launched a website blasting President Barack Obama for “giving away the internet.” And he has scheduled a Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing Wednesday to push Republicans to make good on their promise not to allow the Obama administration to surrender control of ICANN.

“In 22 short days, if Congress fails to act, the Obama administration intends to give away the internet to an international body akin to the United Nations,” Cruz said during a Sept. 8 floor speech. “I rise today to discuss the significant, irreparable damage this proposed internet giveaway could wreak, not only on our nation but on free speech across the world.”

Support for a policy rider to halt the transfer has been building among Senate leadership. Commerce Committee Chairman John Thune, R-S.D., told Politico that he’d back the effort to add an internet policy rider to a short-term measure to fund the government.

Opposition to the transfer has been widespread in the past. In April 2014, 34 Senate Republicans, including then-Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, called on the White House to keep ICANN out of the hands of the United Nations or any other international agency.

When asked if McConnell, now majority leader, would support Cruz's proposal, an aide to the Kentucky Republican declined to comment.

In the House, Rep. Sean Duffy, R-Wis., is quarterbacking a coordinating effort. A GOP aide told The Daily Signal that the Cruz counterpart "has been in talks with the speaker's office and is optimistic."

House Speaker Paul Ryan's office declined to comment on ongoing negotiations. But members of the Freedom Caucus already were warming to that idea Tuesday afternoon.

"It's popular with the American people to maintain sovereignty over our own country and some control over the internet," said Rep. Warren Davidson, R-Ohio, who supports adding the measure to a three-month continuing resolution.

The Freedom Caucus has not taken a formal position, although several members are interested. Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., told The Daily Signal that adding a policy rider on internet control "would be most helpful" in persuading conservatives to rethink their opposition to a short-term budget measure.

For Freedom Caucus members who have been fighting with GOP leadership over spending levels all year. Stopping the transfer of ICANN could be a good consolation prize, Rep. Dave Brat, R-Va., told The Daily Signal.

"If you're locked into a bad [budget] package," Brat said, "we will try to get what we can out of it."

At least one key member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee is already on board.

Rep. John Culberson, R-Texas, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees internet issues, told The Daily Signal he will use "every legislative tool available" to make sure the internet remains under U.S. control.

"I'll push for language in the [continuing resolution] that would prevent the Obama administration from moving forward with this irresponsible internet giveaway," Culberson said.

But this isn't the first time Republicans have tried this strategy to block Obama from making the transfer.

"There has been a longstanding appropriation rider to prevent funds from being used to hand over the internet that the administration is ignoring," a Cruz aide told The Daily Signal.

"The senator thinks that language should be strengthened. He is hopeful that before the Sept. 30 deadline Congress will show leadership and protect freedom on the internet."

Asked about Cruz's latest effort, White House press secretary Josh Earnest projected confidence Monday that the president's ICANN transition would go as planned.

The administration sees the handoff as "the right thing for the long-term security and well being of the internet," Earnest told reporters.

"So that's the approach that we're intending to pursue," he said. "We'll see what kind of tricks Sen. Cruz has up his sleeve."

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