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Water projects flow despite tea party

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Pressure from conservatives helped push the GOP to shut down the government, strip food stamps out of the farm bill and bring the country to the brink of default.

But when many of the same groups united against an \$8.2 billion water infrastructure bill, tea-party Republicans in the House weren't listening.

Instead, GOP members joined with Democrats late Wednesday in a 417-3 vote to greenlight a suite of dam, port-dredging, flood protection and environmental restoration projects, withstanding pressure from conservative groups that said the bill does too little to reform the lumbering, big-spending Army Corps of Engineers.

The near-unanimous roll call was enough to give some members "whiplash," lawmakers said, while offering a contrast to the schism that divided moderate and conservative Republicans during the shutdown. It also showed that groups like Heritage Action, FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity have limits to their sway with the current crop of House conservatives — not enough to keep lawmakers from steering money to popular projects back home.

Beyond that, these kinds of big water project bills are bipartisan affairs that have historically won by huge margins. And the House's version, while formally disavowing earmarks, offered plenty of benefits to Republican lawmakers, steering most of the projects and potential money to GOP-held House districts, according to a POLITICO analysis.

Meanwhile, Congress — and more specifically the House GOP — has been taking a thrashing in the polls after the 16-day shutdown this month. The water bill offered a chance to show Americans that lawmakers were getting back to work.

"Turns out most voters actually want to have the government work on things like water projects, dams and other infrastructure," said GOP strategist John Feehely.

West Virginia Rep. Nick Rahall, the top Democrat on the House Transportation Committee that gave birth to the bill, said even small-government Republicans can appreciate the benefits of federal spending in their back yards.

"A lot of these projects are in tea-party member's districts. If you go through the list you can pretty well judge that," Rahall told POLITICO. "At one point, four, maybe five, pretty well identifiable tea-party members were having a love-in on the floor of the House with this bill."

Another factor: While groups like Heritage urged the House to kill the bill, they didn't go to the wall against it. They didn't "key vote" the bill, so a "yes" vote won't count against lawmakers in the groups' annual legislative scorecards.

"We don't key vote everything," said Heritage Action spokesman Dan Holler, who wouldn't comment on the GOP-heavy lean in the bill's projects. He said Heritage has scored only 112 votes this year out of the 560 the House has cast.

Holler said Heritage is skeptical House Republicans will be able to secure "victories" in conference with the Senate, which in May passed a \$12 billion version that the conservative groups consider worse. "Typically, [these panels] don't work well for conservative policy," he acknowledged.

The House measure, known as the Water Resources Reform and Development Act, would be the first such bill to become law since 2007, when Republicans joined Democrats in overriding a George W. Bush veto for the first time during his presidency. Bush had rejected the \$23 billion bill on the grounds it was laden with pork — Heritage says it contained 800 earmarks — but the House disagreed, 361-54.

This time, many supporters credit House Transportation Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) and his team for spending months laying the groundwork for passage, aggressively sending the message that the bill would create jobs and be good for business.

Shuster's bill had plenty of bipartisan appeal, and offered enough home-town benefits to attract reluctant Republicans.

A POLITICO review found that:

— Thirteen of the 23 projects authorized by the bill fall within Republican-controlled House districts, while only three are in Democratic districts. Seven projects — including port dredging in Jacksonville, Fla., restoration of wetlands and shoreline along the Louisiana coast, and a controversial flood control project near Fargo, N.D. — would directly affect both Democratic and GOP districts.

— The bill authorizes roughly \$4.3 billion in federal funding for projects in Republican districts, and about \$1 billion in Democratic districts. Another \$2.4 billion would go to districts held by both parties.

— Most of the authorized money would go to projects in four states — Louisiana, Maryland, California and Florida — but 13 states in all would benefit, including Mississippi, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas and Iowa. Florida, backed by its 27-member House delegation, would get six projects, most of which are pieces of a massive \$7.8 billion Everglades restoration that Congress authorized in a 2000 water bill.

— Louisiana's three projects came with the highest price tag, more than \$2 billion. The Louisiana district represented by Rep. Steve Scalise, chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee, would see \$284 million authorized for a coastal wetlands project.

The authorizations don't directly provide money for the projects but would allow them to vie for funding in the appropriations cycle.

A Shuster spokesman declined to comment on the POLITICO review. But Rep. Bob Gibbs (R-Ohio), chairman of the Transportation subcommittee that oversees water issues, said the projects weren't based on political considerations. And in some cases, House districts have flipped from Democratic to Republican control during the time since a project was first requested.

"Those projects came from the administration. They came from the president's budget," Gibbs told POLITICO. "The president came out and said he's gonna support the bill."

But the White House statement urging the House to pass the bill still had some criticisms for Shuster's proposal, saying it included "several new projects that the administration has not recommended for authorization due to their marginal return on investment or other concerns." The administration didn't elaborate on what those were.

Supporters point out that many of the projects will offer benefits throughout regions or states, not just within a single congressional district. Case in point: the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project in Georgia, which would allow the waterway to accommodate much larger international ships once the Panama Canal is expanded next year.

While the harbor technically lies within Republican Rep. Jack Kingston's district, the project has received bipartisan support, including from Republican Georgia Sens. Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss and Democratic Reps. Jim Clyburn (S.C.) and John Barrow (Ga.). Vice President Joe Biden also drew attention to the harbor during a visit last month.

"No, folks, this is not a partisan issue," Biden said. "This is an economic issue."

Each project in the bill has gotten a favorable report from the Army Corps's chief of engineers, and even conservative groups like Heritage acknowledge that the House legislation doesn't include earmarks. Still, Heritage believes the bill doesn't do enough to cut the corps' project backlog and doesn't get to the root of the problems with the tax that pays for harbor maintenance.

Heritage has also expressed worries about Congress's ability to keep the lid on the corps' spending in the future, especially given "the Corps's pro-construction bias [and] lawmakers' eagerness to approve projects."

Another critic of the bill, for much different reasons, is Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu, who has vowed to kill the legislation unless it authorizes a sprawling, \$10.3 billion levee system designed to protect coastal Louisiana from Katrina-style storm surges.

The Senate's version didn't authorize specific projects, as water bills have traditionally done, and instead would largely cede to the administration the authority to pick and choose projects. Melding the two approaches, or picking between them, will be the first hurdle for any conference committee.

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