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Rifts Within Both Parties Test Leaders in Budget Fight

By JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — On one level, the budget showdown that continued to play out here on Wednesday is all about the balance of power between the two parties, a question of whether [President Obama](#) has regained his footing and can still control the direction of the country or whether Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) and the Republicans are now calling the shots.

But on another, it is a test of each man's ability to weather challenges inside his own party.

The outcome will help determine whether Mr. Boehner is leading his party or following the demands of the [Tea Party movement](#). For Mr. Obama, it is the biggest test yet of whether he can reposition himself as a pragmatic leader who can recapture the political center and keep liberals sufficiently energized to help him win re-election.

The budget impasse intensified Wednesday, and the president invited Mr. Boehner and the Senate majority leader, [Harry Reid](#), for a late-night Oval Office meeting. Mr. Obama walked into the White House briefing room at 10:45 p.m., not to announce a deal, but to ask both sides to “keep on pounding away at this thing.”

“I remain confident,” he said, “that if we're serious about getting something done, we should be able to

complete a deal and get it passed and avert a shutdown. But it's going to require a sufficient sense of urgency from all parties involved.”

A day of talks seemed to do little to avert a collision between Democrats and Republicans that could result in a government shutdown on Saturday. Each side maneuvered to ensure the other would be blamed if a shutdown occurred.

The negotiations came down to a small amount of money in the context of a \$3.5 trillion budget — roughly \$7 billion — but were complicated by deeper policy disputes between the parties over spending related to abortion services, health care and the environment.

“This is the first major point where everybody's trying to understand what the new dynamic is,” said David Winston, a Republican pollster who has advised Congressional leaders for years. “Ultimately, the goal is to win, not to just find yourself in a fight.”

The president and the speaker have much to gain — yet perhaps even more to lose — if the government closes down on their watch. Their working relationship has fluctuated somewhere between nonexistent and cordial during the first three months of divided government.

But amid their respective chest-thumping, with Mr. Obama accusing Republicans of injecting politics into the debate and Mr. Boehner suggesting that the president has failed to lead, the political fortunes of both men are oddly intertwined. Their approaches set the stage for a test of their leadership that will provide a roadmap for how they will handle even bigger budget fights ahead.

Mr. Obama sought to present himself in the past few days as the man of reason and compromise, a disappointed father figure having to mediate a dispute between two squabbling siblings. It was the latest example of a strategy he has turned to since Democrats experienced a drubbing in the midterm elections last year and he pivots toward his re-election campaign.

“When was the last time you just got your way?” Mr. Obama said in an appearance in Pennsylvania on Wednesday, comparing the budget dispute to an effort by a married couple to work out its differences.

“That’s not the way it works, right? The fact is you have to make compromises.”

The president is so intent on trying to elevate himself over the partisan feuds of the day that he sometimes refers to Democrats in the third person, as though he is not the leader of the party. It remains an open question whether the distance he seeks to place between himself and Democrats on Capitol Hill — his own version of triangulation — will attract independent voters or antagonize members of his party.

“Republicans and Democrats both start making a lot of speeches,” Mr. Obama said. “Usually the Democrats blame the Republicans, the Republicans blame the Democrats.” He added: “I’ve got some Democrats mad at me, but I said, ‘You know what? Let’s get past last year’s budget, let’s focus on the future.’ “

The president’s posture toward Congress has steadily shifted from hands-on involvement — he visited Capitol Hill often during his early days in office — to a far more removed approach. The invitation to the White House on Wednesday evening led some Republicans to suggest that he was grandstanding by inserting himself into negotiations after purposefully keeping his distance.

Mr. Boehner, whose power as speaker could rise or fall depending on how he handles the budget showdown, must contend with an unruly Republican caucus infused by a Tea Party movement that has already showed a willingness to rebel and to drive the party leadership past its comfort point on fiscal issues.

One of the biggest unresolved issues now is whether Mr. Boehner can bring all or most of the Republican freshmen class and its Tea Party-supporting allies along with him if he makes a deal that falls short of the \$60 billion in spending cuts they are demanding for this year.

On Wednesday, Mr. Boehner — who was in the Republican leadership during the government shutdowns of 1995 and 1996 and saw the damage they inflicted on the party — sought to balance the competing pressures on him, trying to show moderation and backbone at the same time.

“There’s an intent on both sides to continue to work together to try to resolve this,” Mr. Boehner said, making a rare appearance alongside Mr. Reid outside the White House late Wednesday evening after their meeting with the president. “No one wants the government to shut down.”

It is also not clear how much the politics of this situation might differ from the shutdowns in 1995 and 1996, and whether Mr. Obama and Mr. Boehner will end up reprising the roles played then by President [Bill Clinton](#), who revived his presidency and Speaker [Newt Gingrich](#), who never completely recovered.

And this fight will be far from the final word.

An even more contentious debate on raising the nation’s debt ceiling and next year’s budget is just around the corner.



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