

Senators eye more budget bill cuts despite House speaker's plea for few changes

The biggest hurdle in the Senate for Trump's tax and immigration bill could come — like it did in the House — from deficit hawks who demand more cuts.

By Mariana Alfaro, Lori Rozsa and Drew Harwell
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House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana) said Sunday that he's made one plea to Senate Republicans as the upper chamber begins its work to pass President Donald Trump's massive tax and immigration bill: Do not make large changes to the measure.

Speaking on "Fox News Sunday," Johnson said that — during the Senate Republican luncheon on Tuesday — he "encouraged them to modify the package that we're sending over there as little as possible, because we have to maintain that balance," nodding to the bill's narrow margin of support in the House.

House Republicans passed the legislation in the early-morning hours of Thursday, following days of tense negotiations, with just two GOP lawmakers voting against it.

Despite Johnson's plea that the Senate move the bill swiftly — and without major modifications — Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-South Dakota) said Wednesday that "the Senate will have its imprint on it." But during the coming negotiations, Thune is likely to face tensions and ideological disputes similar to those Johnson navigated within the Republican conference.

A handful of senators previously voiced concerns over some of the Medicaid changes in the House bill, and Thune said he'd like to see some of the tax cuts made permanent instead of expiring after a few years as the House bill calls for. But the biggest hurdle in the Senate could come — much like it did in the House — from the deficit hawks.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) on Sunday argued that the sweeping bill will dramatically increase the country's ballooning national debt.

"I think the cuts currently in the bill are wimpy and anemic, but I still would support the bill ... if they weren't going to explode the debt," he said on "Fox News Sunday." "The problem is, the math doesn't add up."

Paul said he would consider supporting the measure if they "strip out the debt ceiling."

"But I can't vote to raise the debt ceiling 5 trillion [dollars]," he said. "There's got to be someone left in Washington who thinks debt is wrong and deficits are wrong and wants to go in the other direction."

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wisconsin) suggested he's opposed to the measure House Republicans sent over, telling CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that congressional Republicans "rushed this process" instead of taking more time to find additional ways to cut spending before putting the bill to a vote.

"This is our only chance to reset that to a reasonable pre-pandemic level of spending," the senator said. "But you have to do the work, which takes time."

When asked if he thinks other Senate Republicans share his concerns, he said, "We have enough to stop the process until the president gets serious about spending reduction and reducing the deficit."

At least one Senate Republican, however, remained bullish that his conference will meet its self-imposed deadline of getting the legislation to Trump's desk by July 4. Sen. Eric Schmitt (R-Missouri) told Fox News's "Sunday Morning Futures" that there's "critical mass" on the bill in the Senate, where it will need a simple majority to pass as long as it meets certain fiscal requirements.

"I do think the Senate is going to try and look to see if we can find more savings," he said. "The ball is literally in our court now, and we'll see if we can't make this big, beautiful bill even more beautiful."

Trump, meanwhile, said Sunday evening he anticipates changes in the Senate version of the legislation.

"I think the Senate is going to get there," Trump told reporters before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington. "I hope they're going to get

there. I think they're going to have changes. Some will be minor. Some will be ... fairly significant."

Marianna Sotomayor and Jacob Bogage contributed to this report.