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Someday, when Paul Ryan and John Boehner reflect on the difficulties of herding a fractious House Republican caucus, they’ll both be haunted by the onetime owner of a western North Carolina sandwich shop-turned-Capitol Hill power broker: Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.). Back in summer 2015, Meadows targeted then-speaker Boehner by filing a “motion to vacate” — essentially a vote of no confidence in his leadership. Boehner recognized how difficult it would be to continue even if he won that vote and stepped down instead, leaving Ryan in his place. And then last week, Meadows played the key role in destroying Ryan’s dream of repealing and replacing Obamacare.

But if Republican leaders don’t like Meadows and far-right conservatives like him, they have only their own power grabs to blame. Republican gerrymandering efforts have made Meadows and the rest of his Freedom Caucus electorally invincible.

The GOP held more than 50 futile votes to repeal the Affordable Care Act during Barack Obama’s presidency. Both Ryan and President Trump vowed last year that Obamacare would quickly become history if Republicans controlled both Congress and the White House. Ryan’s American Health Care Act, however, did not go far enough for the far-right Freedom Caucus, and a majority of its members were unwilling to budge. They insisted, for example, that the GOP bill also scrap an Obamacare requirement that insurers cover 10 “essential health benefits,” including maternity and mental-health care. As Ryan and Trump negotiated the bill to the right, however, moderate Republicans representing swing districts balked. Trapped by factions within his own party, Ryan had no choice but to pull the bill.

Trump, his reputation as a closer and dealmaker humbled in his very first congressional fight, targeted the renegade Republicans on Twitter: “Democrats are smiling in D.C. that the Freedom Caucus, with the help of Club For Growth and Heritage, have saved Planned Parenthood and Ocare!” White House insiders told The Washington Post that the Twitter tirade was intended to warn Meadows and the Freedom Caucus that he could make their reelections difficult if they bucked him in the future.

That’s not likely to be an effective threat. The 40 members of the Freedom Caucus represent such safe Republican districts that the only threat they fear is a primary challenge from a conservative further to their right. Republican redistricting guaranteed the GOP a near-lock on the House after the 2010 Census — but it also created a nearly ungovernable faction. They gerrymandered themselves into this predicament.

These congressmen are perfectly content to say no and lose on principle, because compromise and conciliation — the actual work of politics — are the only things that can cost them their jobs. Meadows, after all, holds his seat because of a Republican gerrymander in 2011. His 11th District in North Carolina includes the liberal college town of Asheville and nearby Republican-leaning mountain towns. It had been a competitive district, most recently represented by a conservative Democrat, Heath Shuler, when Republicans in North Carolina’s state legislature won the power to redraw maps after the 2010 election. Aided by national Republicans, they divided Asheville between two districts to dilute Democratic votes. A seat that had seesawed between the two parties is now rigged to safely and permanently reelect one of the most conservative members of the House.

Voters hold Congress in such poor esteem that a Gallup poll in March showed the institution with a 24 percent approval rating. But hardened lines and hardened partisanship make it very hard to replace members — unless they’re beaten in a primary by a more extreme member of their own party. House leaders such as Eric Cantor and even onetime tea party favorites like Renee Ellmers have lost their seats to more conservative challengers in the last two cycles.

In late April, the continuing resolution that keeps the government running will expire. Despite its importance to the economy, Democrats may see little to gain in helping Ryan get the votes to keep it open. The Freedom Caucus may be unwilling to go along, either. The gerrymander may be as old as the republic itself, but the pernicious gridlock inflicted by this extreme, hyperpartisan modern version is neither natural or necessary — and there is more evidence every day that we can either adopt meaningful structural reforms like ranked-choice voting, or live with lasting, painful damage.