Tanya Domi:
Hello, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the CUNY Graduate Center. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating groundbreaking research, assisting New Yorkers and informing the world.

Tanya Domi:
After 15 consecutive congressional roll call votes over the course of four days, Californian representative Kevin McCarthy finally became speaker on January 6th by securing four present votes. McCarthy never did achieve the magical 218 votes, having secured the speakership through a legislative rule that allows present votes, lowering the threshold for victory. Indeed, McCarthy got the gavel after wrestling with 20 members of the right wing MAGA Freedom Caucus, and negotiated away most of his discretionary power according to recent media reporting.

Tanya Domi:
As Nancy Pelosi steps away, thought to be the most effective and powerful speaker in the history of the Congress, it is widely believed that McCarthy appears to be the weakest one since the 19th century. Our guest today, Charles Tien, professor of Political Science at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center is a congressional expert and ideally suited to discuss a new Congress like no other in modern history. His research focuses on American politics, women in minority in politics, voting in elections, and he is co-editor of Polity, Journal of Political Science. Welcome back to the Thought Project, Professor Tien.

Charles Tien:
Thank you for having me, Tanya. It's great to be here.

Tanya Domi:
So after these 15 congressional roll call votes, when McCarthy becomes speaker, he not only gave it away, but he's actually now perhaps the weakest. Your thoughts on how and why McCarthy is thought to be one of the weakest speakers in US congressional history, and what do you expect him to do with this weak political hand?

Charles Tien:
So we don't know how his tenure is going to go, how long it will last, but the assumption you're making is that he is a weak speaker and that's because to secure the present votes and to secure the votes to become speaker, he had to concede a lot of rules changes. And those rules changes are going to make it very difficult for him to schedule legislation on the floor that he wants, bring legislation to the floor that he wants. These are things that speakers and the leaders of the majority party typically have absolute control over. And so by giving away seats, I think maybe three seats on the Rules Committee, seats then also to other committees, rules changes on debt limit increases, how those will be voted upon, will make it difficult for McCarthy to rule. And I think it's important to note that it's not unusual in the modern era for speakers to lose votes on their speakership vote. Nancy Pelosi, if you remember, she lost 10 or 15 votes when Democrats regained control.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah, it wasn't unanimous.
Charles Tien:
Yeah, right. And you said she was one of the most consequential speakers in memory, and so she lost quite a few votes from her own party and also Paul Ryan did and John Boehner did as well. So it's not unusual. What's unusual I think, is that the majority of the ruling party is so slim, and so it's going to be a real challenge to rule with such a slim majority.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. And we're going to see how those rule changes play out over time. It's not clear. As a matter of fact, it's been reported that a three-page addendum to the new legislative rules was adopted by the Republican Caucus that calls for freezing all spending and cutting social security in Medicare, two of the most popular programs in America. This addendum is yet to be shared with the Democratic Caucus and not everybody has seen it. So just with this first move here that is clearly meant to be more or less intrepid and under the wire, so to speak, what kind of agenda like this, how's this going to resonate with the public? And will it matter really at the end of the day because won't most of this legislation be dead on arrival in this Senate?

Charles Tien:
So that's a good point. But all legislation that has to be passed as you know, has to have both the House and the Senate approve it. So yes, it will be dead upon arrival in the Senate, but the Senate has to negotiate with the House in raising the debt limit. So if there are proposals to reduce spending in the debt limit increase vote, that has to be negotiated. So it will matter.

Tanya Domi:
So they'll go to conference,

Charles Tien:
They'll go to conference or that's how it used to be done. And as you know, it's done less and less like that now. And that was one of the complaints I think of the holdouts that the old legislative process or the textbook process that we read about in our civics textbooks, in our American government textbooks, where committees make informed decisions and then there are conference committees that you mentioned that resolve differences between the House and the Senate are all done in a timely manner. That really doesn't happen anymore in Congress. And so part of the rules changes was to have a 72-hour waiting period between when the legislation was written and when members would take a final vote on it so they would have time to read-

Tanya Domi:
To actually read the bills.

Charles Tien:
Read the bills, yes. So there will be consequences, I think. And if the debt limit isn't increased, even for a short period, that could wreak havoc in global markets, it could crater the US stock market. The government doesn't keep on its lights come October 1st. Parts of the government may shut down. And so those have real consequences I think on the lives of everyday Americans.

Tanya Domi:
And most of the business reporting is very concerned about this debt limit not being raised because right now the US economy, despite all the challenges that's been presented by COVID and everything that's happened, it remains the most dynamic and the biggest economy in the world. And the inability to raise the debt limit could actually put the country in a recession overnight.

Charles Tien:
Certainly. And so it's important to realize that failure to raise it simply means that we're not agreeing to pay bills-

Tanya Domi:
To pay bills, right.

Charles Tien:
That we had already committed to. And so it'd be like getting our credit card bill and then saying, "Even though I made all these spending decisions, I'm just not going to pay these anymore." So the credit rating of US treasury bonds may tank, the confidence in investors-

Tanya Domi:
In the US dollar.

Charles Tien:
In the dollar and the treasury bonds will decline. And so that will have, again, real consequences on the economy.

Tanya Domi:
Are you surprised that the Democrats didn't attempt to address the debt limit in the lame-duck session? I'm surprised that they didn't even try to do it before the lame-duck.

Charles Tien:
They had a lot to do, I think in that lame-duck session. And I think they chose to fund the government with what's called a continuing resolution through, what is it, September 30th. And so-

Tanya Domi:
Right, through the end of the fiscal year.

Charles Tien:
And if they would've just passed another three, four months continuing resolution, government probably would've been facing a shutdown come March. And so I think the decision was to fund the government for the fiscal year and to take their chances on a debt limit vote. I think they're betting that the Republicans won't walk off that cliff.

Tanya Domi:
Well, we shall see. The Republican Party has promised its supporters repeatedly during the last two years that when they get the gavel, which they've gotten, that they intend to investigate everything
under the sun, including Hunter Biden, the son of President Biden, for allegations of malfeasance in relationship to Ukraine company. They also intend to seek, determine why and how COVID-19 was created in China. And right wing member Jim Jordan from Ohio is the early favorite to lead this oversight in this new panel entitled the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government. That was set up in response to revelations by Elon Musk in internal documents branded as the Twitter Files. This kind of agenda, is this going to really help the Republicans in 2024?

Charles Tien:
Short answer I think is no. And so this agenda of investigating Hunter Biden, I think is popular amongst the far right, the Freedom Caucus constituents. And so in that sense, it may help Republican candidates win primaries and fend off primary challenges. But on the whole, are these agenda items popular with the country come 2024? Of Republicans pushing a conservative agenda like this, I think will be popular with their base. So the red meat issues of the Hunter Biden investigations, the select committees to investigate the weaponization of the federal government will be popular with their base. But then once we get to I think the summer and the fall where the debt limit has to be increased, where government spending has to be passed.

Tanya Domi:
Appropriation bills are-

Charles Tien:
The appropriation, yes.

Tanya Domi:
That's the cycle in the fall.

Charles Tien:
Right. Right.

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Charles Tien:
I think that's when you'll see the right wing in the caucus exert its pressure to cut spending. And that'll make it really difficult for Kevin McCarthy to govern because he's got to choose whether to shut everything down or to govern. John Boehner had that choice to make in 2015, and when he chose to govern and keep the lights on, that's when this motion to vacate was threatened against him and he decided to resign. I don't think it's a popular agenda. And come 2024, if that's what the Republicans stick to, I think you'll see them lose another presidential election. So I think it's important to remember, this far right agenda has not been popular since when, 1992. So since 1992, every presidential election has been won-

Tanya Domi:
By the Democrats.
Charles Tien:
By the Democrats, except for one, 2004.

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Charles Tien:
So this far-right agenda doesn't play in presidential elections.

Tanya Domi:
And they lost a lot of seats. The Democrats only lost nine seats.

Charles Tien:
Right.

Tanya Domi:
Nine seats in a midterm with a Democrat in the White House. They kept preaching and talking about the red wave. The red wave never came.

Charles Tien:
No, it didn't. No, it didn't. And I think the big loser in this election was the Republican Party, even though, like you said, they did pick up nine seats. So to put that in perspective, your average midterm loss is about 25 to 30 seats.

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Charles Tien:
And so with economy that wasn't doing so well with the president, president Biden's approval rating sitting in the forties, the Republicans should have picked up 30 to 40 seats. And so even though they did pick up seats, they did not perform up to expectations.

Tanya Domi:
They certainly snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, in my view. And just today as a matter of fact, speaking of the Republican Party and their poor candidates, mediocre rather, the New York GOP in Nassau County in Long Island finally called today for the resignation of George Santos, this candidate who was elected, who literally lied about nearly every aspect of his life. And his bio is patently false. Of course, Kevin McCarthy got his vote for speaker. And so he's quite valuable in Washington. But now Long Island is saying, "No more, George Santos, you need to go. You need to resign." What are your thoughts on those?

Charles Tien:
So I think an interesting process is playing out, which is that at state and local level politics, you're seeing I think a Republican Party trying to move past Trump. And so I think there's some Trump fatigue in some
state houses. So I think Thomas Etzel was reporting today that in South Carolina and Ohio and even Pennsylvania, moderates were actually defeating far right leaders. And so I think this is another indication that at the local level, so at the Nassau County level, there's a desire for moderate Republicans, or at least Republicans who aren't going to be lying about their resumes, breaking laws potentially in terms of using campaign funds to pay for personal expenses.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. He's under investigation now for that very issue.

Charles Tien:
But to have him expelled would take a vote by the House. And so the House would have to do that. The majority would have to do that. And I think with the narrow margins that we talked about earlier, Santos has been a yes vote for McCarthy. And as long as he remains a yes vote for McCarthy, I don't think McCarthy's going to be asking for his resignation.

Tanya Domi:
I agree.

Charles Tien:
The House Ethics Committee has essentially been gutted as well as part of these new proposals, I believe.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. I mean it's been reported, although it's not in writing yet, that the House Committee on Ethics has been disbanded essentially by this party.

Charles Tien:
It will still exist in name, I believe. And so the rules changes, I think meant that all of the Democrats who had served for eight years or longer on that committee would have to be replaced. So there are term limits for members of that committee.

Tanya Domi:
Sure, they rotate out, yes.

Charles Tien:
And staffing, I think would have to be done in the first 30 days and I think would have to be approved by four members of the committee.

Tanya Domi:
Of the committee, yes.

Charles Tien:
So that means a gutting of the committee staff potentially.
Tanya Domi:
Who are in essence the experts. People should know that, that the staff, especially the professional staff that works in these standing committees, they are the experts. And both Professor Tien and I were both congressional aids as a matter of fact.

Charles Tien:
Yeah, that was a long time ago.

Tanya Domi:
It was. For me too.

Charles Tien:
Yes. So the staff does important work there. It's supposed to be a nonpartisan committee and a nonpartisan staff. And apparently part of the agreement was to have three Freedom Caucus members seated on this committee. No, I'm sorry, that's on the House Rules Committee. So there's probably membership of Freedom Caucus members also on the Ethics Committee, but essentially the committee, I believe has been gutted. Not that it was a very strong and effective committee before that. Anyway, I think House members are very reluctant to punish their own. Last member to be expelled was Jim Traficant, I believe in the early two thousands. Charlie Rangel from New York, Upper Manhattan was-

Tanya Domi:
Censure.

Charles Tien:
Sanctioned censure on the House floor.

Tanya Domi:
Yes, he was.

Charles Tien:
And so the belief is that I think amongst House members, that they're sent there by their constituents. And so if the constituents want to remove somebody, it's up to the constituents. So I think Santos is seated for two years, and then we'll see how he survives the next election and I don't think he will, but I think he'll be there for two years.

Tanya Domi:
But going back to this weak speaker, do you think he will be the only speaker of this session?

Charles Tien:
Boy, I wish I had-

Tanya Domi:
A crystal ball?
Charles Tien:
The powers to know that, but if I were... You're forcing me to give an answer, and I would say no. He's going to be put in a tough spot, especially on I think appropriations bills. And so October 1st, as you know, is when all appropriations bills have to be passed.

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Charles Tien:
Part of the agreement was to have all of these separate appropriations bills voted on individually. That means that the trains have to run on time, all summer long, budget resolutions have to be passed, appropriations committees, subcommittees have to meet. They have to-

Tanya Domi:
And they have to vote.

Charles Tien:
Right, and they have to vote. And the last time we saw this kind of agenda, I think was 1995, where Republicans led by Newt Gingrich wanted to basically eliminate the Commerce Department and a couple of other departments. They, I think, set the funding levels at zero, or close to it. And that led to a shutdown that lasted for, I don't remember, it was a few weeks, I believe.

Tanya Domi:
Yes. I think you're right.

Charles Tien:
And public opinion in 1995 sided with Bill Clinton and the Democrats. It became a human story about federal employees missing mortgage payments, not getting paid, rather than an ideological story about reducing the size of government. So when McCarthy has to face the Freedom Caucus on these appropriations votes, I think he'll be pressured to go the root of shutdown. And that will only last for a while, like all shutdowns have in the past, and when he's then forced to govern and pass an appropriations bill, that'll have to do with Democrats, I think then you'll see this motion to vacate be exercise. So that was also part of the agreement as well.

Tanya Domi:
And what is it one member of Congress under the new rules can actually bring an action against the speaker?

Charles Tien:
That's right. So apparently motions to vacate are given privileged rules, meaning that they're immediately brought to the House floor.

Tanya Domi:
And circumvents the Rules Committee.
Charles Tien:
Right, right.

Tanya Domi:
Which is the most powerful committee in the House, in my view, because it controls the floor.

Charles Tien:
Exactly.

Tanya Domi:
What you're going to vote on.

Charles Tien:
Yeah. So that's one thing we haven't really talked about, right?

Tanya Domi:
That's true.

Charles Tien:
... is the Rules Committee. Now, I don't think we've seen the membership of the Rules Committee yet. I don't think we know how many Republicans and how many Democrats will be on this committee. But typically it's comprised of a super majority of the majority party.

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Charles Tien:
So my guess is you'll see-

Tanya Domi:
The party in power.

Charles Tien:
... nine or 10 Republicans and maybe four or five Democrats. And so one thing that McCarthy could do, we'll see, is he'll give the three committee seats to then the Freedom Caucus members, but then he may stack the committee with his loyalists in increasing numbers. So I think he gets essentially decide the number of Republicans on that committee. So that'll be interesting to watch.

Tanya Domi:
I think also another really interesting aspect to what happens in this caucus is that you pointed to moderates in South Carolina and some other states, the reporting indicates that the moderates are very concerned about investigating everything and everybody, and that's going to be interesting to see that
tension play out because they're probably more concerned about getting reelected with something to show for it. Those tensions, I think are going to play out throughout this session.

Charles Tien:
I think you're right. What's interesting about that concern for reelection, I think the Freedom Caucus members are worried about the same thing. Meaning that their constituents sent them to wreak havoc, to reduce spending, to cut taxes, to do everything that they're pushing McCarthy to do. And so if they don't deliver, they may lose. And the more moderates in the Republican Party, as you stated, if they don't deliver, then they'll lose. So it's a real in party division that we'll see play out in live time over the next few months.

Tanya Domi:
Well, everybody should pull up in front of their TV and with popcorn every day, because this is going to be rock and roll, I think.

Charles Tien:
Well, we got to do that with the speaker vote.

Tanya Domi:
That's right. That was four days of 15 roll calls. Charles Tien, thank you so much for being here today. We'll have you back in about six months so we can talk about what we've seen.

Charles Tien:
That'll be great.

Tanya Domi:
Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project. And thanks to our guest, professor Charles Tien of Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:
The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by audio engineer Kevin Wolf and CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.