

# At Center of Health Debate, Two Marks, Two Groups, and One Divided State

North Carolinians Mark Meadows and Mark Walker—and the conservative groups they run—have approached Obamacare repeal with opposing strategies.



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Rep. Mark Walker was chatting with a single reporter near the House chamber Monday evening when Rep. Mark Meadows blew past like the eye in a hurricane of journalists, with questions flying and recorder-clutching arms fluttering in his face.

Days earlier, Walker was getting the same treatment, the highest-profile period of his young career capped by the highest-profile event for a member of Congress: A sit-down press conference with the president of the United States.

That was, of course, before he announced he would vote for the American Health Care Act, the House Republicans' alternative to Obamacare. Now he was talking to a single reporter outside the congresswomen's restroom.

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“I got bumped from two [TV] shows over the weekend. That’s what happens when you get to a ‘yes,’” Walker lamented with his eyes on his colleague, before quickly catching himself. “But this isn’t about attention. This is about the cause.”

As their profiles rise in the debate over the health bill, the maneuvers of the “Two Marks,” as some colleagues have taken to calling them, have become a matter of intrigue among fellow Congress members and the press. The same can be said back home in North Carolina, where both are thought to be contenders to replace Sen. Richard Burr when his term runs out in 2022.

“You can make the argument it appears that both of them are moving to trying to position themselves to be in a better position for a statewide primary,” said Paul Shumaker, a Republican strategist in the Tar Heel State.

“I have zero interest in running for the Senate,” Meadows said, though he conceded he would have a natural base of support, since activists tried to draft him to primary Burr last year.

Walker was less assertive: “I’m not ruling it out,” the former Baptist minister said, noting he has pastored in the population centers of Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro, so he could draw on that Christian support if he decides to run.

How the two men position themselves leading up to what could be one of the most consequential votes of their careers is a fascinating window into Republican politics and policymaking: Would voters respect a member who takes a principled stand even if that stand is against President Trump? Or would voters who elected the author of *The Art of the Deal* respect a deal-maker who votes for an imperfect bill after negotiating changes?

A first name and home state are not the only things the men share. They are both crushingly nice Southern Christians with warm smiles. They both ran as Washington outsiders, won crowded primaries, and share similar voting patterns. And notably, they both chair influential conservative groups—Walker the Republican Study Committee and Meadows the House Freedom Caucus—two groups distinguishable by how far to the right they want to go and how hard they are willing to push their leaders to get there.

So any point of departure between the two would be notable for the purposes of a Senate primary, and as things stood Tuesday afternoon, the Two Marks were on opposite ends of the health care debate—and of the president.

That was never more apparent than on Tuesday morning when Trump, visiting Capitol Hill to attend a weekly meeting of House Republicans, gave a shout-out to Walker for negotiating changes to the health care bill and then, when he got what he asked for, supporting it.

Then Trump turned his attention to Meadows, who has been leading the Freedom Caucus in last-ditch opposition to the bill, which will be called to a vote Thursday. Meadows and his group are holding out for the bill to include a repeal of Obamacare's essential health benefits, a provision that House GOP leaders maintain they cannot include because it would run afoul of Senate rules.

"I'm coming after you," Trump joked toward Meadows, according to sources in the room. "But I'm not going to have to. ... I know you're going to get there because you told me you're not going to hurt me."

GOP leaders privately think they can use Trump to draw Meadows to vote for the bill, according to leadership sources. If he can get to a "yes," perhaps he too can secure the prized sit-down press conference with the president. After all, who would want to have the president against him in a member-on-member Senate primary—assuming Trump is still president after 2020?

Yet as of Tuesday afternoon, Meadows was maintaining his opposition, despite traveling to Mar-a-Lago over the weekend and the White House during the week for negotiations.

"I've never made calculations based on how I would gain or lose politically. I think that's the problem with Washington, D.C.," Meadows insisted. "We may very well take votes that make you unelectable in future elections, whether it be for Senate or your next congressional race."

The Two Marks' different negotiating strategies have been noticed by their colleagues.

"Mark Walker was much more effective in getting what he wanted because he laid out very clearly, 'These are the things I need to get my support and the support of my caucus,' and negotiated in good faith," said Rep. Richard Hudson, a North Carolinian and a member of the GOP whip team.

To Meadows, he assigned more selfish motives.

"If he admitted negotiations are over, you wouldn't put him on camera anymore," Hudson said. "It seems like the Freedom Caucus, in negotiating, they keep moving the goalposts."

That view is hardly unanimous. Rep. Walter Jones, another North Carolina Republican, said that Walker's actions show a lack of courage.

“He goes to the White House and Mr. Trump says, ‘Look at my hair,’ and they look at his hair and change their vote? That’s pretty weak,” Jones said. “I like Mark Walker but I don’t believe he has the strength that Mark Meadows has, to fight for what you think is right.”

For his part, Walker said he conducted the negotiations with no thought given to electoral politics. He said he tried to do what he thought was right, especially because no matter which way he votes he could open himself up to political attacks.

He said that after Trump and congressional leaders agreed to amend the bill’s Medicaid provisions to give states the option of instituting work requirements and block grants, he had little cause to keep holding out.

“We put a marker down that we would not vote for the first draft until it was improved,” he said. “Because of the improvements, as a man of my word—and hopefully leading from a statesmanship quality, not just somebody who’s looking for the attention—that’s enough that we were able to get there.”




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