

[By Marin Cogan and Jake Sherman](#)

Democratic Rep. Peter Welch doesn't scream on the House floor to get attention. He doesn't gesticulate wildly on the split screen. And he seems to naturally get along with the conservative lawmakers who should be his sworn enemies in the debt-limit debate.

In a medium that favors heat and light, the nebbishy, soft-spoken liberal from Vermont has quickly become an unlikely spokesman for the left on the debt limit. He is just as comfortable making the progressive case for a clean debt ceiling hike on MSNBC as he is on Fox News, where he recently complimented an anchor for the quality of her questions. In some ways, he's the anti-Anthony Weiner — a firm but kinder spokesman for activist liberals in search of someone who speaks for them on a national level.

Welch says he's trying to find the balance between the “substantive and political” approach for a party that doesn't want to see the president give too much ground on its top priorities but doesn't want to see the country default on its debt. As time runs out for a deficit-reduction deal, he is likely to be a voice for progressives.

The question is, in an environment as polarized as the 112th Congress, can he make a difference?

“My effort has been to lay out a responsible, substantive approach to the deficit and a substantive approach to paying our debts and to demonstrate that we're willing to work, we're willing to cooperate and we're willing to negotiate — but not sell out at any price,” Welch said in an interview.

In April, he began urging his colleagues for a clean vote on the debt ceiling. His staff aggressively positioned him as the prescient voice on debt ceiling issues, reminding reporters of predictions he made that came to fruition, issuing statements reacting to the latest comments from Republican House leaders and even circulating a report by JPMorgan Chase on the effects of a debt ceiling default on the economy as suggested recess reading for staffers.

He's also worked at burnishing his bipartisan credentials. In early March, he hosted Chief Deputy Whip Peter Roskam (R-Ill.) and a bipartisan group of lawmakers for a Costco lasagna dinner at his apartment. He's known to drop by Republican members' offices and ask them to work with him on legislation. He teamed with Pennsylvania Rep. Bill Shuster to fight efforts to derail debit card swipe fee reforms and with Missouri Rep. Jo Ann Emerson on a bill that would allow the government to negotiate drug prices on behalf of Medicare Part D recipients. He and Utah Rep. Jason Chaffetz have worked together on resolutions calling for an end to the war in Afghanistan.

"He's pretty liberal, but he's reasonable. He's not a flame thrower like Anthony Weiner was," said Chaffetz, who called Welch's work on Capitol Hill "refreshing."

It's clear to Democrats and even some Republicans that Welch has been a leader on message and strategy in this debate. Majority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) raves about Welch's communication skills and legislative savvy, saying that his chief deputy whip has done a "great job" as a voice for the party.

Rather than being someone who arrives at a message and goes for a few factoids to support it, he delves into the issues, comes to the policy conclusion and says, 'How do I effectively message what I think is the right policy?'" said Robert Greenstein, founder and president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Former Maine Rep. Tom Andrews, who worked with Welch on anti-war initiatives as the national director of Win Without War, said, "One of the big challenges, particularly from the House side because Democrats are in the minority and Peter is in the minority, is the frame of the debate. ... Peter is the kind of personality and thinker who can cut through [the politics] and focus on what's important."

Not everyone thinks it's possible. Although Welch generally is well liked by his colleagues — and has an unusually healthy campaign chest of more than \$1 million — there's some griping about what fellow Democrats see as an opportunistic publicity push. Colleagues privately say that Welch, a liberal Northeasterner, is branding himself as someone who can find common ground with the far right tea party wing of the Republican Conference — an impossible task, they say. Even the Republicans he speaks with are sometimes puzzled by his overtures.

"It's our job to try," Welch said. "There's a tendency in politics to attribute bad motivation much too quickly, and the sooner you attribute bad motivation to someone you disagree with, the harder it is to find some common ground to make some progress that would give people confidence that you got it more right than wrong."

When Democrats got a clean debt ceiling vote in May, 97, just over half of the 192 House Democrats, voted in favor of it. "Republicans thought it was a cute play to call our bluff and put the [clean] debt ceiling vote on the floor," Welch said. "We got a majority of the Democratic Caucus to vote for it. So we actually have established credibility that when it comes to paying our bills, we'll do it."

On Friday, as the bid for a grand bargain between the White House and congressional leaders fell apart, Welch yet again pushed for a clean debt ceiling hike — even though most Democratic leaders had long ago abandoned it for practical reasons. The move was certain to shore up support among progressives anxious to relay the message that their party was serious about economic stability.

As one of six siblings, Welch said he learned how to communicate effectively over family dinners. "They were lively conversations," he said. "If I tried to shout over my older brother, my mother told me [to] keep quiet. If I tried to shout over my little sister, my father told me to shut up. I found the best way to be heard was to lower my voice and actually speak when I had something to say."

Making bipartisan legislation as a liberal Democrat in the GOP-dominated House isn't exactly an easy task, and Welch's record in this Congress has been mixed. The effort to stop a delay to debit card swipe fees was successful in the Senate. His amendment with Chaffetz failed 294-123. The Medicare Part D bill with Emerson is still relatively new, but the idea has the support of even some of the conservative Republican freshmen.

Still, Welch sees an opportunity for Democrats to play a leading role as a deal comes together.

"We could have the opportunity to play a major role. The reason is that the Republicans in the

House are divided into two camps on the debt ceiling — the camp that's going to vote no and the camp that's going to vote hell no," Welch said. "The only way something is going to pass is with significant Democratic support."

But, he admits, their relevance is still dependent, in part, on Speaker John Boehner's (R-Ohio) ability to find a deal that can make it through his ideologically rigid conference and pass the House. "I'm watching like everybody else is to see how he manages this," Welch said.