

By Patrick Reis

House Democrats plan to use the opening hours of the new Congress Thursday to start their battle over the debt ceiling.

The Democrats are introducing a pair of resolutions to change House rules in a way that would limit Republicans' ability to use the debt-ceiling increase as a budget bargaining chip. The proposals are an attempt to short-circuit a tactic Republicans used in 2011 to extract spending cuts from the White House and congressional Democrats.

Neither resolution will be adopted by the GOP-controlled House, but they are intended to give House Democrats a head start on their debt ceiling messaging, said Vermont Democrat Peter Welch, who is introducing the resolutions in tandem with Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.).

"We've got to bring to people's real attention what this tactic of using the debt ceiling means to the economy," Welch said. "We have to have zero tolerance for the idea that America will default on its obligations."

One proposal would reestablish the "Gephardt rule," which automatically sends the Senate legislation raising the debt ceiling when Congress adopts a budget. The other would prohibit the House from considering legislation raising the debt ceiling if it contains any other provisions, such as spending cuts.

Welch said Republicans were successful in using the debt limit as a bargaining chip in 2011 in large part because Democrats were slow to realize that the majority was serious in its threat to send the government into default.

"We blew it. We were lulled into a sense that at the end of the day, they wouldn't be serious," he said. "Both parties have grandstanded on the debt ceiling in the past. But in the end, both parties knew the debt ceiling had to be increased and they voted to increase it."

"That changed in 2011, when some [Republicans] voted 'no' and others voted 'hell no,'" Welch said.

President Barack Obama has said he will not negotiate around the debt ceiling this year, which will need to be raised in about two months to avert default. Republicans say any boost to the borrowing limit will have to be accompanied by spending cuts.

"While I will negotiate over many things, I will not have another debate with this Congress about whether or not they should pay the bills they have already racked up," Obama said Tuesday night.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said earlier this week that lawmakers must use the upcoming debt ceiling debate as a way to "achieve meaningful spending and government reform" — and said the Senate should act on legislation by early February.

And South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham is also urging his party to tie a debt ceiling increase to spending cuts, saying on Fox News last week he hoped "Republicans will fight as hard on the debt ceiling as Barack Obama did on tax rates."