

ROLL CALL

Congressional Orientation on Bipartisan Legislation Could Stop Gridlock

Commentary

By Robert Weiner and Autumn Kelly

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Members of Congress are so caught up in their parties that they are oblivious to recent history where politicians have been successful working together to pass some of the nation's most cherished legislation. The just-passed appropriations bill, where everyone wanted to hurry home for the holidays, is an outlier. Orientation for new members teaches ethics and rules, gives a tour, takes pictures and restates the primer of "How a Law Is Made." It lacks lessons showing how Congress has worked in passing bipartisan legislation. Members of the House and Senate are probably as rusty as classes of young people who know few leaders of the past.

Orientation including bipartisanship as an effective strategy in the past just might avoid party gridlock for important legislation on health care, tax reform and immigration.

Chris Matthews wrote about "Tip and the Gipper," but it wasn't just the speaker and President Ronald Reagan who saved Social Security in 1983. House Minority Leader Bob Michel, R-Ill.; Sen. Majority Leader Howard Baker, R-Tenn., and leaders of Reagan's Commission on Social Security Reform — notably House Aging Chairman Claude Pepper, D-Fla.; Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., and Sen. Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., worked across party lines.

Pepper railed about making people wait longer and pay more to get Social Security but he ultimately said, "There was no [political] alternative or the program would die." As the bill passed, Reagan said, "I hope and believe it reflects a bipartisan spirit of putting people before party." The compromise added solvency for 75 years.

Pepper also pushed with Paul Findley, R-Ill., to pass a bill abolishing mandatory retirement at 65, in 1978 for federal workers and 1986 for everyone. Sen. [Charles E. Grassley](#), R-Iowa, then a House Aging Committee member and later chairman of the Senate Aging Committee, along with all the committee Republicans helped move it. Grassley joked to staff at a breakfast, "I'm a conservative and you're a liberal but we're friends and work well together."

The Business Roundtable and the AFL-CIO opposed the legislation — both sides wanted control over hiring. However, because the bill was bipartisan and seen as civil rights legislation against "ageism as odious as racism or sexism," it passed the House 359-2 and the Senate 89-10.

In 1986, Reagan, with a split Congress, passed landmark tax reform with the help of Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, D-Ill., and Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore., approving perhaps the most compressive tax code overhaul in recent history.

Though an adversary of the president who forced government shutdowns, Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., compromised with Bill Clinton over the 1998 budget and reformed welfare to require jobs.

In 2006, Judiciary Committee leaders [John Conyers Jr.](#), D-Mich., and [Jim Sensenbrenner](#), R-Wis., led a renewal of the Voting Rights Act. It passed the House 390-33. Unfortunately, in the political landscape of 2014, their latest renewal is going nowhere. Conyers told us recently, "Bipartisanship plays a more important role than ever before. In the end, that's the only way things get done."

Following a years-long benefits delay and coverup by the Veterans Administration, its health system was reformed in August. Perhaps two of the least likely bedfellows made it happen — Independent Bernard Sanders, D-Vt., the Senate Veterans Affairs chairman, and House VA Chairman Jeff Miller, R-Fla. The scandal was so deep and Republicans so much wanted to attack an Obama administration failure, while Democrats and Republicans alike wanted to do something positive for the sacrosanct veterans issue, that it succeeded quickly.

Desperation and stick-it-to-em should not be the only reason for bipartisan action. Pride in carrying out the people's mission should be at least as motivating.

Sen. Everett Dirksen, R-Ill., ended the filibuster with a compelling speech to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, gaining 27 Republican votes in the Senate. He stated, "I trust the time will never come when the waters of partisanship will flow so swift and deep as to obscure my estimate of the national interest."

Now, newly elected and current members are conditioned by their parties, without studying the effective congressional bipartisan legacy. It's time for the House Administration and Senate Rules Committees to instruct the clerk of the House and secretary of the Senate to offer sessions to new and old members on how Congress has worked together in the past to build legislation that has shaped the society that exists today.

Robert Weiner is a former spokesman for the Clinton White House, and was a senior staff for Reps. John Conyers Jr., Charles B. Rangel, Claude Pepper and Ed Koch and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy. Autumn Kelly is senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates.