

2 key senators epitomize spirit of cooperation on Capitol Hill

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT • TBEAUMONT@DMREG.COM • FEBRUARY 20, 2009

Washington, D.C. — The longtime partnership of Republican Sen. Charles Grassley and Democratic Sen. Max Baucus on the powerful Finance Committee suffered a rare setback with the partisan tone of the economic stimulus bill.

Iowa's Grassley and Montana's Baucus have long been exceptions to the perception that Republicans and Democrats can't work together on Capitol Hill. During the past eight years, they have sought consensus on nearly every major initiative to come through their committee.

They've practiced the kind of collaboration that President Barack Obama has said he wants to see more of in Washington. That changed with the stimulus bill, which left Republicans complaining that their ideas were left on the scrap heap by the White House and Democratic leaders.

Now, the two senior senators say the rift was only temporary and they expect to resume cooperation on health care reform. If they do, Grassley and Baucus will give Iowa and all of rural America an influential seat at the table and invite consensus on a thorny issue considered a top priority to voters here and to Obama.

"In the context of health care, if you have a Democrat and Republican of Grassley's and Baucus' stature at the table, they can keep people in the kitchen even when it gets hot," said Baucus' chief of staff, Russ Sullivan.

Baucus, finance chairman, and Grassley, the ranking Republican, are accustomed to operating as a team. They say they found it awkward when the White House and Democratic Senate majority leaders insisted on minimizing GOP influence on the economic recovery bill.

They say it's only a temporary departure from their usual cooperation that has guided major tax, trade and health care legislation.

"I don't think it's Baucus' intent or fault," Grassley said, "because there hasn't been a single bill in the eight years where he's been chairman or me, except for this one, that we haven't sat down ahead of time to reach a bipartisan mark."

The bipartisan collaboration is an increasingly endangered practice that was more common a generation ago, observers say.

Every Tuesday at 5 p.m., Grassley meets Baucus to talk about finance committee business.

Their hourlong meeting has been a fixture on their schedules since 2001, when Grassley was elected committee chairman and Baucus became the ranking Democrat. Baucus approached Grassley about working together, first on tax-cut legislation sought by President George W. Bush.

"The whole point of this is to minimize misunderstandings," Baucus said in an interview.

Since then, Grassley and Baucus have traded the chairmanship three times, as the partisan balance in the Senate has seesawed. They have racked up major accomplishments such as the 2001 tax cuts, fast-track trade agreement authority in 2002 and a Medicare drug benefit in 2003.

Now, the senators' tax, trade and health care policy staffs crowd into the weekly meetings with Baucus and Grassley. Their chief health care aides hold their own weekly meetings.

"It got to the point after a year where we'd sit in this room over here and, if you were a fly on the wall, you'd be convinced this was one office trying to pragmatically solve problems," Baucus said. "No bitterness. No acrimony. No tension."

Baucus refers to his staff's relationship with Grassley's as that of friendly families.

In 2006, Baucus gave Grassley's grandson Pat \$1,000 toward the Republican's race for the Iowa House of Representatives.

The two senior senators rib each other like brothers.

After a key vote on the Senate floor, Baucus once kiddingly told the famously penny-pinching Grassley to let his staff go for the rest of the day. Grassley insisted at a recent weekly meeting that the only reason he agreed to meet in Baucus' office is the free coffee.

Beyond their similarly low-key personalities, they also are age and political contemporaries.

Baucus, 67, was elected to the U.S. House in 1974, the same year as Grassley, who is 75. Grassley was elected to the Senate in 1980, two years after Baucus.

The two keep their egos in check and share a straightforward approach to getting things done, said Grassley's chief of staff, Kolan Davis.

The only times they have failed to send a bipartisan bill from the committee have been when the majority party, backed by the White House, has insisted on strict adherence to its wishes, Davis said.

"I think Grassley and Baucus, if left to themselves, could have always come up with some kind of compromise," Davis said. "I think ideology has won out a couple times, and that's where leadership has intervened."

In the case of the second round of Bush tax cuts in 2003, majority Republicans and the Bush administration pushed it despite Democrats' objections. Grassley remained loyal to the party, while Baucus opposed the cuts.

The roles have been reversed in recent weeks as Baucus has complied with orders from the White House and Democratic majority that the committee block most Republican amendments to the stimulus bill.

"It doesn't threaten the relationship, but it's made it a little awkward, frankly," Baucus said. "But we're both big boys, and professionals, and we understand. There's no hard feelings."

Baucus did manage to keep an amendment Grassley had supported to protect middle-income families from an average tax increase of \$2,000.

Brown University political science professor Wendy Schiller said Obama would be wise to seize on Grassley's alliance with Baucus on health care.

"Make the most out of a cooperative relationship in a key Senate committee for their health care bill. You can't get a health care bill in the Senate without the finance committee," said Schiller, an expert on Senate relationships. "And he can't do that without Charles Grassley, and that's what Baucus will tell him."



Sens. Charles Grassley, a Republican from Iowa at left, and Max Baucus, a Democrat from Montana, rely on weekly meetings to discuss national goals and how to achieve them.

Baucus-Grassley accomplishments

Below are some of the key accomplishments of the Senate Finance Committee that have become law since 2001, as Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley, a Republican, and Montana Sen. Max Baucus, a Democrat, have collaborated as their parties' leaders on the committee.

BUSH TAX CUTS, 2001: Grassley chairman. It was the first project for Grassley and Baucus, and first bipartisan success. A \$1.3 trillion, 10-year cut passed the Senate with a big bipartisan majority. Some Democrats criticized the plan, but Baucus said: "I knew I was probably going to support it even though most Democrats would not. ... At that time, we had a huge projected surplus."

TRADE PROMOTION AUTHORITY REAUTHORIZATION, 2002: Baucus chairman. Free-trade agreements are negotiated by the White House, but Congress votes on them without power to amend them. The trade authority was enacted under President Bill Clinton, reauthorized under President George W. Bush. It passed by a healthy margin in the Senate. Some Democrats resisted, citing concern for labor and environmental standards.

MEDICARE PRESCRIPTION DRUG BENEFIT, 2003: Grassley chairman. Ten-year, \$395 billion drug benefit marked major expansion of Medicare, and put Grassley at odds with some members of his Republican base. "Too often, our seniors are choosing between heat and prescription drugs, or between food and prescription drugs," said Grassley, an architect of the bill. "This bill is about enhancing the quality of life." It passed the Senate by a narrow margin.