



THE BARRE MONTPELIER TIMES ARGUS: Welch reaches across the aisle for goals and friendship

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WASHINGTON — Peter Welch and David Schweikert are two Congressmen who probably have more political differences than similarities.

Schweikert, a Republican from Arizona, questions the science behind climate change; Welch does not. And while the National Rifle Association's legislative grading system gave Schweikert an "A" rating for his beliefs on gun control, Welch earned a "C."

But the two legislators are close friends who have worked together on legislation, a seeming anomaly in the current political environment.

In the realm of politics, the two collaborated together in 2012 on the passage of the Jumpstart Our Business Startups Act, a law intended to encourage funding for small businesses. Outside of work, Welch has hiked the Grand Canyon with Schweikert. And this August, Schweikert says he plans to visit Welch in Vermont, "as long as there is some maple syrup in the deal."

The relationship between Welch and Schweikert is emblematic of the Vermont Congressman's theory on politics: strong friendships in both parties will bring about successful legislating.

"I work with Republicans and Democrats because if you want to succeed you need allies — it's not rocket science," Welch says. "You treat them with respect, you try and focus on the common ground."

Welch is now producing the most bipartisan legislation of his time in office. So far this Congressional session, 40 percent of the 22 bills he has introduced have Republican co-sponsors.

Welch co-founded the Problem Solvers Coalition, a bipartisan group of legislators in the House and Senate who often craft legislation together. He makes a point to visit the Republican side of the House chamber regularly. And he has been hosting dinners at his D.C. home with Republicans since he first assumed his House seat.

Welch began reaching across the aisle when Democrats still held a majority in the House, a move he says has forged powerful Republican friends who are now willing to work with him.

"So much of modern media, politics, and fundraising is about vilifying the other side," Schweikert says. "But what happens when you have some sort of relationship with that other side is you can't vilify them, you know they aren't bad people."

Welch has worked with Republicans of all backgrounds. Rep. Steve Womack, a Republican from Arkansas, has worked closely with Welch on the Marketplace Fairness Act, a bill to create an online sales tax similar to the ones brick and mortar stores must pay.

"I truly appreciate (Welch's) willingness to focus on where we agree instead of on our differences," Womack says. "I am glad to count him as a friend."

In May, Welch and Womack fought successfully against a proposed rule by the Food and Drug Administration to end the practice by brewers of providing spent grain to farmers for their livestock.

"The FDA backed down and backed off," Welch says. "Having Steve [Womack] as an ally was really important."

Welch has even managed to work with Tea Party Republicans. After the FDA hinted they might prohibit cheese-makers from using wood shelves to age their product last week, Welch rallied the support of Paul Ryan, a Republican from the cheese-making state of Wisconsin.

Welch, Ryan, and others plan to offer an amendment to this year's agriculture appropriations bill to prohibit any FDA action against wooden shelves.

Welch has also worked with Tea Party Republican Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming. In January, Welch introduced a bill with Lummis to require government intelligence agencies to disclose their funding levels.

Welch acknowledged an apprehension about Tea Party tactics, which he said could elevate partisan battling. But he says Lummis was "intelligent, principled, and good to work with."

A strong coalition of allies for Welch is crucial, for he is Vermont's only House delegate. But Welch's most powerful Republican ally, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia, recently lost his primary election to an untested Tea Party candidate named David Brat.

Cantor was instrumental in securing federal funding for Vermont in the wake of Tropical Storm Irene, and proved a necessary ally in passing Welch's energy efficiency legislation out of the house in March. When Cantor embarked on a fact-finding mission to the Middle East two years ago, Welch was the only Democrat he invited.

"Our voting records were completely opposite, but we found specific things to work on," Welch says about Cantor.

With Cantor on the way out, Vermont's voice in the House may be temporarily diminished. But Welch says Cantor's successor as Majority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, a Republican from California, is also a friend. The two were in the same Congressional class and have dined together.

Welch says he learned to first make Republican friends when he served in the Vermont Senate in the 1980s. When Republican leaders — then the majority — placed him on the influential finance committee, Welch says it imbued in him an emotional desire to become constructive.

"We acknowledge in Vermont that we've all got to go at it together," Welch says. "In Vermont you are in a committee every day with both parties and you get to understand that the people who disagree have the same motivation you do: to make the state better."

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