

Advocacy White Paper

Senate Changeover

INTRODUCTION

The federal government's political balance of power in Washington, D.C., is very tenuous and its importance affects what legislation gets passed by the Congress and signed by the President.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ISSUE

On June 6, 2001, one U.S. Senator switched his political party affiliation from Republican to Independent and this changed the entire U.S. Senate power structure from control by the Republicans to the Democrats. This Senate changeover in power has affected everything from Committee Chairmanships, to congressional staff ratios to legislative agendas. This paper will detail this historic shift in power.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

At the start of the first session of the 107th Congress, the Senate had 50 Republican members and 50 Democrat members. With the election of Republican President George W. Bush in November 2000, the Republican Vice President who serves as the President of the Senate, Richard B. Cheney, cast the tie vote to declare the Senate controlled by the Republicans.

Then at midnight on June 5, 2001, Vermont Republican Senator James Merrill Jeffords changed his political party affiliation from Republican to Independent and said that he would caucus with the Democrats. This simple act gave the Democrats a 1-vote margin and control of the Senate.

Born in Rutland, Vermont, on May 11, 1934, James Merrill Jeffords is the son of the late Marion H. Jeffords and the late Olin M. Jeffords, former Chief Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court. His father's family settled in northwestern Vermont in 1794. After attending public schools in Rutland, Jeffords received his undergraduate degree from Yale University in 1956 and his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1962. Jeffords served active duty with the U.S. Navy from 1956 to 1959, and retired from the U.S. Naval Reserve as a Captain in 1990. He is married to Elizabeth Daley and has two children, Leonard and Laura. Jeffords' residence is in Shrewsbury, Vermont. Jeffords served as a Vermont State Senator for Rutland County from 1967 to 1968 and held his first statewide office as Vermont Attorney General from 1969 to 1973. From 1975 to 1988 Jeffords served as Vermont's Congressman At Large. In 1988, Jeffords was elected to the United States Senate as a Republican where he has served as Chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and also as the Co-Chairman of the Northeast-Midwest Senate Coalition. Senator Jeffords is currently serving his third term.

Jeffords, 67, had been part of a small band of Republican moderates -- mostly from New England -- who have grown in importance in recent years as Republicans kept a slim majority in the Senate. When the group opposed the Republican positions, the party leadership had little choice but to compromise or lose. Jeffords' adamant refusal to back President Bush's budget outline earlier this year, with its \$1.6 trillion tax cut proposal, was more than some in the Republican Party could take. With a Republican back in the White House, Jeffords' position on the Senate Finance Committee -- which writes tax legislation -- caused his opinion to carry special weight.

Jeffords has been known to risk the wrath of the Republican Party in the past. Senator Jeffords was one of only five Senate Republicans to vote in 1999 against both of the articles of impeachment against Clinton. He has consistently supported an overhaul of the nation's campaign finance system over the wishes of Republican leaders and Bush and openly criticized the 1994 "Contract with America" that Republicans believe gave them control of the House. His tax cut position created a new round of party grumbling and raised the possibility he would face serious political retribution. Finally, fed up with the Republican Party, Jeffords decided to switch to Independent status to allow the Democrats to control the Senate and one of the three key branches of the federal government.

Senator Jeffords is not the first politician to switch political parties. There have been a number of party switchers in the past. Seventeen senators have officially switched parties since 1893. Five party switchers currently serve in the United States Senate:

- Sen. Strom Thurmond (South Carolina) -- Democrat to Republican, (9/16/64)
- Sen. Phil Gramm (Texas) -- Democrat to Republican (1/5/83), switched while a member of the House
- Sen. Richard Shelby (Alabama) -- Democrat to Republican (11/9/94)
- Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Colorado) -- Democrat to Republican (3/3/95)
- Sen. Bob Smith (New Hampshire) – Republican to Independent (7/13/99); Independent to Republican (11/1/1999)

Four party switchers currently serve in the U.S. House. Since 1981, fourteen members of the House have officially switched parties. Rep. Virgil Goode of Virginia was the most recent party switcher on January 24, 2000, when he switched from Democrat to Independent, and now leaning Republican.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/POSITION STATEMENT

The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) Advocacy Committee should remain informed on political issues and their effects on healthcare issues and policies related to healthcare information and management systems professionals.

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Key Words

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Control