

Freshman Steil seeks to reach across the partisan divide

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A crumpled-up piece of paper U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil once fished out of the trash bin sits proudly in a frame on the Janesville Republican's desk in his House office.

It might appear unseemly to an outsider that a federal lawmaker would choose to showcase garbage, but the crinkled green slip displaying the phrase "417-2" holds special significance to the first-term congressman. The hand-written markings represent the vote tally from the House floor on H.R. 3050, Steil's bill that altered SEC regulations on mutual funds investing in small-cap stocks.

"The 417 to two vote, which I really like, that tells me I went right up the middle," he said in an interview with WisPolitics.com in the Longworth House Office Building. "I lost one Democrat, one Republican. Perfect."

While Steil keeps the vote tally as a memento of personal success — it's not every day that a freshman congressman from the minority party sees his bill brought to the House floor — it also indicates his belief that bipartisanship must be rekindled in order to move the country forward.

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As a first-time lawmaker and the only freshman in the delegation, Steil arrived in Washington for a new-member orientation less than a week after winning a hard-fought, 12-point victory over Dem Randy Bryce to succeed friend and former Speaker Paul Ryan. While he came to the Capitol that Monday morning with "eyes wide open," Steil said he was surprised by the way "partisanship has become institutionalized."

He recalls staying in a hotel close to the Capitol with fellow incoming lawmakers, most of whom he did not know. This is an opportunity, Steil thought to himself, to

build bridges and forge relationships outside of party affiliation that would allow this new generation of lawmakers to tackle some of the most pressing issues facing the country.

But after riding the elevator down to the lobby, Steil got his first taste of the deeply rooted partisan divide.

“You walk out the front door and there are two buses, a bus for Democrats and a bus for Republicans,” he said. “To me, that typifies how partisanship has become institutionalized. There’s no reason for that divide to be there in that environment.”

The challenges are frustrating. He acknowledges removing party designation from the buses when the next set of incoming lawmakers head to the Capitol for their House orientation isn’t an act that will directly lead to the “transformative change” he craves. But it would be a step in the right direction.

And while Steil doesn’t want to be “Pollyannish” about the prospects of partisanship disappearing from Washington, he hopes the little things — like his “pebble-a-mile-deep” bill on investing in stocks that won near-unanimous support and changing the bus designations — will get lawmakers on the right track.

“I think building up that repertoire of being able to get things done in a period of divided government puts you at the forefront of being able to tackle this bigger stuff down the road,” he said.

Steil says his meet-me-in-the-middle approach stems from a decade’s worth of experience in the manufacturing industry in southeast Wisconsin. As an executive with the Milton-based plastics manufacturer Charter NEX Film, he learned that “you need to get a deal done or you’re out of business.”

But that trait, which he says is “obvious” to employees across Wisconsin, is often lost on federal lawmakers.

“On the political side, you don’t need to strike a deal to stay in office,” the former attorney and UW System regent said. “I think some people on the political side of this need to be willing to sit down and find areas where folks can work together.”

But Steil’s willingness to get things done doesn’t mean he is saddled with the dreaded “Republican In Name Only” tag.

He opened the interview by describing his job like being a starting lineman for the Green Bay Packers: “Every time we snap the ball, I try to move the ball three yards forward” while Dem defensive linemen are crouched across the line of scrimmage, “happy to stand up and smack me back.”

And Steil’s voting record paints the picture of a fiscal conservative.

One of his most noteworthy breaks with GOP leadership and President Trump came in voting against a resolution to raise budget caps, which would set up spending bills to have the potential to move forward at an ever-increasing pace. Trump tweeted his support of the Dem-backed resolution, urging Republicans to “go for it” and letting them know “there is always plenty of time to CUT!”

But for Steil, “getting spending back in line” is a priority he says he’s placed “at the forefront.” To do it, he wants to borrow ideas from the state Legislature and “take the Wisconsin approach of budgeting to Washington.”

That starts with implementing a Wisconsin-style biennial budget. While there are differences between state and federal budgeting processes — namely that the state budget must be balanced while the federal budget doesn’t — Steil said he sees the benefits of a two-year appropriations cycle.

“It slows the process down, allows it to be more thoughtful, gives more power, I think, to legislators to do the right thing,” he said. “And because you’re slowing it down, it hinders some of these third-party groups that have had outsized influence.”

Steil also called for automatic continuing resolutions that would roll over spending at the previous year’s levels if Congress can’t come together to strike a deal, a provision that mirrors one from Wisconsin.

Such a move would eliminate the threat of a government shutdown, a major animus for the Janesville lawmaker who came to Washington during the nation’s longest shutdown. Within the month, he broke with GOP leadership to join 20 Republicans who crossed the aisle to support a Dem resolution condemning shutdowns as “detrimental to the nation.”

But with government funding set to expire at the end of the month, Steil forecasted a “challenging political environment” for appropriations bills “to be successfully brought across the line.”

“I’m pretty committed to making sure we don’t have another shutdown,” he said. “That said, I think it’s going to be challenging for Congress to come together to get all of these spending bills, not only through the House, but through the Senate and ultimately signed by the president.”