

Minnick not alone in breaching party solidarity

Jim Fisher

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Most American voters probably send people to Congress who they hope will judge individual issues on their merits, rather than hewing to whatever the line is from increasingly polarized parties.

Thankfully, voters in Idaho's 2nd Congressional District have found such a person in Rep. Mike Simpson.

Simpson, whose political resume includes service as a city councilor, legislator from the Blackfoot area and election by his fellow Republicans as speaker of the House, is no fence-sitter when it comes to party. No one expects to see him follow Sen. Arlen Specter in jumping from the GOP to the Democrats. He is a Republican and will remain so.

But Simpson's allegiance to his party does not overrule another allegiance he has exhibited since first joining the Idaho Legislature in 1985: to what he thinks is best for his constituents.

He demonstrated that in his freshman year on the Legislature's House Education Committee, where he voted against bills aimed more at pushing right-wing social causes than at helping schools. And, as Sunday's New York Times points out, he's still demonstrating it.

In a story focused on the number of Republicans who have broken with their party's leadership to support Democrat-led bills in the current Congress, the Times' Carl Hulse reports that Simpson had voted for three recent bills opposed by top Republicans in the House.

One tightens regulations on credit card companies, including restricting them from raising interest rates on money already owed under a lower rate. Another bolsters resources to pursue financial fraud, and a third goes after predatory lenders.

Simpson is unapologetic about supporting all three.

"It is hard to say we shouldn't put in more stringent standards on mortgage lending, given what has happened in the past," he says.

In the same story, he says he happens to agree with Democrats on some issues, adding, "I thought that credit card bill was a good vote, quite frankly."

This session, Simpson has also supported expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program and omnibus public lands legislation that included protection of Idaho's Owyhee Canyonlands. Both were opposed by Republican leaders.

"The Republican willingness to join with Democrats on some legislation has come gradually," Hulse writes, "but does suggest that the notion of bipartisanship is not the mirage some have declared it to be."

At a time when many Republicans believe their best course is to oppose everything a Democratic president and a Democratic majority choose to do, it is comforting to know that some are still willing to work across the aisle for the good of the country. Freshman Democrat Walt Minnick from Idaho's 1st District has repeatedly shown he is unafraid to vote with Republicans when he thinks they are right, and Simpson continues to vote with Minnick's party when he agrees with them.

That speaks well of both House members from Idaho, and of the voters who elected them. - J.F.