

Betsy Wright Hawkings
Chief of Staff, Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Bipartisanship in Practice

Betsy Wright Hawkings describes the importance of a strategic approach to bipartisanship.
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Well, with regard to the Congressional Accountability—any legislation we introduced, we always had a Democratic co-sponsor. And that was just, Chris had been a state legislator for 13 years before he came to Congress. He was, I think, maybe with the exception of two terms, always in the minority when he was in the state house. So, there was probably a practical aspect to this, too, which is make sure that you can get a Democrat onboard because maybe they'll help make sure you get a hearing. And he brought that with him to D.C. and that was how we did things. But there was a—you know, again, another practical aspect, which is if you can't get somebody to co-sponsor it from the other side of the aisle you're not going to be getting the votes from the other side of the aisle. And if the goal is to actually pass the bill and have an impact, then you're going to want to be getting votes, so you need to start by having the conversation about "Oh, you won't support this. Well, what can we tweak? Is there something we can do to adjust it?" And, and actually the re-draft of the Congressional Accountability Act happened because the other Members that we were working with on the other side of the aisle sort of said, "Maybe we can add"—the first time, in early '93, before it was part of the "Contract," you know, Congressman, Congressman Swett from New Hampshire and Congressman McHale from Pennsylvania both kind of said, "Maybe we could put a little enforcement, you know, some kind of reference to enforcement"—and it made it a stronger bill, you know. And it made it, it meant that when we went to draft the bill that was ultimately going to come to the floor under the "Contract" we had it that much further along in the process. But we always had a one-for-one, like we couldn't add a Republican on our bill unless we could add a Democrat, and we couldn't add a Democrat on our bill unless we could add a Republican and there were a few exceptions to that, but there was never a bill we dropped that didn't have as an original co-sponsor a Democratic Member.