

Staying on the bipartisan path

By Daniel A. Mica

I was always a self-declared "flaming moderate." The truth is, that fits my personal belief. I have always felt the extremes of both political parties do not truly represent the great bulk of America's citizens. And, for better or for worse, as a member of Congress, I had a split district in South Florida — nearly 50 percent Republicans and 50 percent Democrats.

This gave me great latitude and, at times, massive headaches. From the start, I always knew that whenever I cast a vote, nearly half of my constituency would be upset with me. But I had the freedom to vote my conscience, and my conscience told me, in most instances, to eliminate the 10 to 15 percent extreme left and right, and support the vast majority that represented 70 to 80 percent, and, I think, the true feelings of most Americans.

Today the partisan divisions in Congress, and even within today's electorate, have grown more pronounced.

Many people feel energized by what they see so far in the current Congress and administration,

and want more. But many others are plainly dissatisfied and angry about issues, and they will be campaigning actively on behalf of challengers. They will be campaigning as individuals and against sitting incumbents. Their political involvement and motivations are driven by more than any role they may have as a member of an association. It is that kind of an election year. Recent members' retirement announcements reflect the frustration that is being felt out there, on both sides of the aisle.

This is where the dilemma occurs for many associations on K Street. How must we respond? We at the Credit Union National Association have never been viewed as a Democratic or Republican organization. Most organizations cannot afford to be seen as partisan. We certainly cannot. We have issues that the Democrats support and issues that Republicans support. They are not always the same, but we have to keep our options open to properly represent our members. If we are perceived as solely Democratic or Republican, we will quickly lose our ability to be an effective lobbying organization for credit unions. I

am particularly mindful of this today, as more than 4,000 of our association members are on Capitol Hill lobbying on credit union issues to their respective congressional delegations.

I know firsthand of a story involving a current senator who shall remain nameless. He got so tired of a particular trade association's aggressive and partisan lobbying tactics that he told that trade association's CEO, who had the chairman of his board in town: "You're no longer welcome in this office. Your organization has become an arm of the opposing party." Not good; goodbye hard-earned access.

I know that many who read this newspaper are experienced veterans who have been through numerous election cycles and tumultuous periods. But I would advise people to conduct at least an informal evaluation of their organizations' political temperatures and policies.

Meaning, one might just need to say, as we do to our members: "By all means, you are entitled to work for the candidates you believe in. But when you are representing us, you must always remember to take the partisan hat off." Put another way,

our association members must keep their personal agendas personal. They have a fiduciary responsibility to represent credit unions only, when they wear the CUNA name.

Long before I joined CUNA and when I first became a lobbyist, I had to let go a member of my lobbying team who, contrary to our mission, was putting a partisan face on our issues when advocating our positions to members of Congress. I know that we all have our preferences, but the key to lobbying is keeping the eye on the agenda and what is best for the organization.

In times like these, some people can too easily lose sight of that fact. A strong K Street leader will remind his or her members or clients that they need to take a deep breath and walk with a rational head down both sides of the aisle. There is wisdom in being neutral and keeping one's political passions focused on the collective cause.

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