

Gillibrand again goes her own way in budget-deal vote

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WASHINGTON — More and more Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand is charting her political course in a leftward direction, voting with liberal stalwart Sens. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., against the two-year budget deal hashed early Friday.

Her fellow New Yorker, Sen. Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, was one of the chief architects of the deal, a compromise that the Brooklyn native characterized as a major breakthrough against legislative gridlock.

“What makes Democrats proudest of this bill is that after a decade of cuts to programs that help the middle class, we have a dramatic reversal,” said Schumer in a statement issued in the wee hours after the Senate approved it 71-28. “Funding for education, infrastructure, fighting drug abuse, and medical research will all, for the first time in years, get very significant increases, and we have placed Washington on a path to deliver more help to the middle class in the future.”

But compromise wasn’t in Gillibrand’s lexicon for this vote, or others over the past year since Republican Donald Trump became president.

In the case of the budget, Gillibrand said failure to extend the legal status of Dreamers who came to the U.S. illegally as children was the deciding factor.

“Republican leadership has refused to do the morally right thing by protecting the young people who know only this country as their home,” said Gillibrand, referring to the 700,000 young immigrants who became legal through then-President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. “We shouldn’t allow our young people to be used as bargaining chips in this country. I believe Senators on both sides of the aisle should fight for these kids as hard as we would fight for our own families.”

Trump cancelled DACA last September, setting the clock ticking down to a March 5 deadline, after which all DACA beneficiaries would be in the U.S. illegally if Congress fails to act. In New York, there are about 42,000 DACA recipients.

Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, as part of negotiations to win

budget-deal votes from Democrats, agreed to put DACA-related legislation on the Senate calendar for Monday.

Although McConnell said he couldn't guarantee the outcome, he did commit to what he said is an open process aimed at seeing what kind of measure could win 60 votes _ the number needed for passage.

That was enough for other Democrats such as Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who had made previous votes on temporary spending measures contingent on DACA relief.

But it was not enough for Gillibrand. (The Albany native was not available for a phone interview.)

Although she styled herself as an independent-minded centrist in the two years she represented the Hudson Valley as House member for New York's 19th congressional district, she has veered to the left since replacing Hillary Clinton as senator in 2009, and winning elections in 2010 and 2012.

Up for re-election this November, she faces little serious opposition so far. Her name is often included on short lists of possible 2020 Democratic presidential contenders, which political analysts say may at least partially explain her budget vote.

"The national potential race is the obvious explanation, with no downside in New York state," said Gerald Benjamin, a veteran political scientist at SUNY New Paltz.

Gillibrand last year was the only senator not to vote for any of Trump's cabinet nominees, although she did vote for VA Secretary David Shulkin, an Obama holdover, and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley.

In addition to Warren and Sanders, two other oft-mentioned Democratic aspirants also voted "no": Sens. Corey Booker, D-N.J., and Kamala Harris, D-Calif.

Votes that favor what some might call left-wing orthodoxy over compromise arguably hold Democratic contenders like Gillibrand in good stead with the Democratic base, which ultimately chooses the candidate.

But in the Democratic battle between center and progressive, Clinton decisively beat Sanders for the nomination in 2016 _ and then lost to Trump.

The net effect of the 2016 race on the Democrats' center-versus-left dichotomy is difficult to calculate. But whether it was smart politics or simple political conviction that guided her, Gillibrand clearly tossed the dice early Friday.

One clue may be her Twitter account. On Thursday, she devoted only one tweet to the budget vote — a reiteration of her concern over DACA. By contrast, she unleashed a barrage of 13 tweets on treatment of women.

Most focused on the Rob Porter mess at the White House, in which one of Trump's top aides abruptly resigned amid varying explanations of how he kept his White House job even though the FBI had flagged him for two instances of abuse against two former wives.

Other topics included equal pay for women, paid family leave, and women's access to reproductive health.

These issues are signature issues for Gillibrand, much like sexual assault in the military and on campus.

But in voting against the first multi-year deal to fund the government since the start of the fiscal year Oct. 1, 2017, Gillibrand arguably voted against a large number of interests important to New York state.

Among them is \$1 billion in aid for the nation's dairy farmers, many of them struggling upstate to make ends meet.

It also extended the Children's Health Insurance Program (Child Health plus) to 10 years. CHIP, which covers 700,000 children in New York, provides health insurance for children in families just above the poverty who do not qualify for Medicaid.

And it gave \$7 billion for community health centers, which in New York serve 2.2 million low-income patients at 750 sites including many in rural areas upstate.

Community health centers factored into the "yes" votes of Reps. Elise Stefanik, R-Willsboro, and John Faso, R-Kinderhook.

"It was not a hard vote for me," Faso said in an interview. "The reality is we have to compromise to make the government stays open. I'm a realist."

But it is far from clear that any of this will come back to haunt Gillibrand.

Benjamin of SUNY New Paltz said he doubted it would.

"New Yorkers like statewide officials who run for president," he said. "In some states it may be a negative, but here it conforms to our idea of our accustomed (though not lately) leadership role."