

Frelinghuysen Caught Between Gavel, District, and Trump

The Appropriations chairman has already annoyed GOP colleagues by opposing the health bill, and more breaks his party are on the horizon.



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Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen had yet to see a bill signed into law as the new chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, but he was already apologizing to his colleagues.

The mea culpa, delivered to a House Republican members-only meeting in the Capitol last week, had nothing to do with the power of the purse, the main perk of the committee that his more than 20 years in Congress finally gave him the seniority to lead.

Instead, Frelinghuysen apologized to his colleagues for his public and ill-timed dismissal of Republicans' health care rewrite the week prior. That a top committee chairman would break with leadership on a critical bill was bad enough, even if it was forgivable given the unique health care needs in his home state of New Jersey.

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What really perturbed his colleagues was that, without forewarning leadership, he issued a public statement the day of the vote calling the bill “unacceptable,” even though leaders believed they could count on his vote—and after leaders asked members to keep negative opinions about the bill private. The legislation may well have been doomed before then, but the statement was seen as its death knell. More moderate members subsequently came out against it and it was pulled from the floor.

“There is some disgruntlement because this was a tough miss for our Republican majority. It was an embarrassing outcome to a substantial issue that a lot of us talked about in our campaigns,” said Rep. Steve Womack, a fellow appropriator. “I think there’s an expectation around here that if you’re in a key leadership position, then when the leadership offers you something ... you’ll be there for it.”

Frelinghuysen’s stance on the health bill illustrates the difficult and unique position he is in, both politically and on matters of policy. In a sense, he could not have come to power at a worse time; he is a Northeastern, moderate, Republican who supports abortion rights, in a conference that has drifted away from him.

What’s more, Democrats are targeting his seat for a 2018 election pick-up, and controversy surrounding President Trump and GOP efforts to repeal Obamacare have energized liberals, who have been protesting at Frelinghuysen’s district office demanding he hold a town hall.

Among his colleagues, Frelinghuysen’s statement was especially striking because in order to secure his chairmanship, he had promised leaders and members of the Appropriations Committee that he would not put his personal politics above the will of the conference.

“One of the things we had discussed going into this, when he wanted to take the chairmanship, was that at the end of the day he understood that when he was negotiating these bills he’d be negotiating on behalf of the conference, as opposed to his own philosophy,” said Rep. Robert Aderholt, another appropriator. “He’s in a very difficult situation with his district, no doubt, because his district is more out of sync with the rest of the conference.”

Heading into an end-of-April deadline to keep the government funded, colleagues are left wondering whether Frelinghuysen can really balance the political and policy needs of his state with his role as a chairman, especially when shepherding bills through the House that are sure to include budget cuts and anti-abortion language favored by Trump and the majority of the Republican Conference but not by Frelinghuysen himself.

Already, Frelinghuysen has positioned himself in opposition to several of Trump’s budget priorities. He told constituents last month that he is not inclined to cut federal funding for the arts, health research, or environ-

mental protection. He also said he wants a detailed plan for a border wall before he agrees to fund it, which could set up a fight with the administration.

Frelinghuysen declined an interview request. But his committee spokeswoman, Jennifer Hing, stressed that any individual vote Frelinghuysen has taken should not be mistaken for an indication of how he will run his committee.

“As always, the committee’s products will reflect the will of the committee, the conference and ultimately, the Congress,” Hing said.

Still, rank-and-file members of the powerful Republican Steering Committee, which decides committee chairmanships, have discussed whether to call a meeting to have Frelinghuysen explain himself. But leadership has been reluctant, for fear of opening another intraparty fight, according to two members, speaking anonymously to discuss internal conference matters.

Instead, after the statement, leaders quietly dispatched appropriations cardinal Rep. Tom Graves to get an explanation.

“I still stand behind him,” Graves said. “Does it stress relationships with him and leadership? Maybe.”

That will be difficult to heal in a business where relationships are currency as much as policies and campaign donations. Now, members noted, it will be all the harder for Frelinghuysen to credibly ask members to take one for the team and vote for his spending bills when they can counter that he himself didn’t. He’ll have to rely on the same whip team he spurned to rally votes for his bills. Furthermore, members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus are smarting as they take the brunt of the blame for the health care bill’s failure while Frelinghuysen goes unpunished, a point that is sure to resurface in fights yet to come.

Given all of that, members noted, the statement was a clumsy move for someone who has spent more than half of his life in politics, and whose family is one of the country’s most enduring political dynasties, with ancestors in politics dating back to the Continental Congress.

It was clumsy too for someone who understands his place as an outlier in the conference. Frelinghuysen is viewed as a hard and smart worker, and his colleagues like him because he includes them in policymaking. But he has few close relationships in Congress. Underscoring a recognition of his own vulnerabilities, last year he asked Graves to be his lead whip for his bid for chairman, hoping Graves could lend the campaign the conservative cosign Frelinghuysen lacked.

Frelinghuysen had the seniority for the post, but behind the scenes, more conservative Reps. Aderholt and Kay Granger also considered running. Among their concerns were Frelinghuysen’s past support for and

donations to Planned Parenthood. Ultimately, the whip effort and Frelinghuysen’s promises to be a team player quickly tamped down those concerns. Leadership endorsed Frelinghuysen’s run and he took the gavel without a fight.

With leadership now looking to revive the health care bill and with the first government funding bill of this Congress due by the end of April, Frelinghuysen may have to choose again between his district and his party. He could be forgiven once for turning his back on leaders, but perhaps not again.

“Occasionally you go to the leadership and say, ‘This is going to be very difficult for me,’” Aderholt said. “I think leadership would understand. But I think if it’s something that’s a continual problem, you get into an area that’s a bit more murky.”

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