

Schumer's 'cave'? Shutdown deal puts spotlight on Dem leader

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans tried to make Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer the face of the government shutdown. Now, he's becoming the face of the Democratic retreat.

For two days, Schumer, perhaps the most powerful Democrat in Washington, succeeded in keeping his party unified in a bid to use the government funding fight to push for protections for some 700,000 young immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children. But as the shutdown moved into its third day, the New York Democrat and his party buckled as several Democrats backed a deal to end the shutdown in exchange for a Republican pledge to address the immigration debate in the near future.

Schumer quickly became a punching bag for the right and left.

"It's official: Chuck Schumer is the worst negotiator in Washington — even worse than Trump," said Murshed Zaheed, political director for the liberal group CREDO.

"Schumer caved," tweeted former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, an ally to President Donald Trump. He added, "Lessons learned — Schumer burned."

Schumer had little margin for error in this first major test of his muscle and maneuvering as leader.

The pragmatist was balancing the demands of a liberal base eager for a fight with the president and the political realities of red-state senators anxious about their re-election prospects this fall.

As liberals embraced the fight, some vulnerable senators met with Schumer on Sunday morning and urged a compromise to end the shutdown.

“The question is, how do we get out of here in a way that reflects what the majority of the body wants to do,” said Sen. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, who is among the Democrats on the ballot in November. She added: “It is critically important that we get this done today.”

The Senate voted Monday to pass a bill that would extend government funding through Feb. 8. In a bid to win over a few Democratic holdouts, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell also pledged to take up legislation on immigration and other top Democratic priorities if they weren’t already addressed by the time that spending bill would expire.

McConnell’s pledge was enough to sway the handful of Democrats he needed to pass the spending bill.

Democratic aides said that while Schumer, who spent the weekend calling members on his flip phone, initially appeared to be holding the party together, the desire to end the shutdown won out.

Liberal leaders across the country hosted a conference call before Monday’s vote to encourage Schumer and other Democrats to oppose any deal that excludes protections for the young immigrants.

“To anyone considering such a move, let me be clear: Promises won’t protect anyone from deportation,” said Greisa Martinez Rosas, a so-called “Dreamer” and the advocacy director for the liberal group United We Dream. “Delay means deportation for us.”

Despite controlling the White House and both chambers of Congress, Republicans pinned the blame for the shutdown squarely on Schumer, accusing him of being captive to liberals and advocacy groups which opposed any spending package that didn’t result in a solution for the young immigrants. The White House and GOP officials branded the funding gap the “Schumer Shutdown,” spreading the phrase as a hashtag on social media.

Immigration advocates hoped Schumer would see that as badge of honor, but there was anxiety about his resolve.

“He went to the mats,” said Frank Sharry, the executive director of the immigration advocacy group America’s Voice. “He had the backbone to lead his caucus into a high-stakes, high risk battle. It thrilled progressives.”

Should Democrats blink first, he predicted, “The era of good feeling quickly will be replaced by anger and disappointment.”

Schumer isn’t the most natural fit for the role of champion of the left.

The energetic, four-term senator is viewed as more of a pragmatist than an ideologue. He has long faced skepticism from some liberals, thanks, in part, to his Wall Street ties. He frustrated many Democrats with his opposition to the Iran nuclear deal championed by President Barack Obama.

In 2013, Schumer was part of a bipartisan group of senators who worked on a sweeping overhaul of the nation’s fractured immigration laws. The package, which would have created a pathway to citizenship for millions of people in the U.S. illegally, was narrowly approved in the Senate but never taken up by the House

Just last month, immigration advocates, including members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, were furious with Schumer and Democratic leaders for not forcing a fight over the young immigrants. Democratic aides said despite the pressure from some of his party’s most energized forces, Schumer knew his caucus would not hold together at that point. Indeed, 18 Democratic senators ultimately voted for the short-term spending bill that kicked both the budget battle and the immigration fight into the new year.

The dynamic shifted in January. Democrats began the year hopeful that Trump, who has expressed sympathy for the young immigrants, would be willing to make a big deal. When those plans collapsed, Schumer found more enthusiasm even among moderate Democrat senators to withhold support for a spending bill that didn’t address immigration, even if it meant forcing a shutdown.

He was helped along, according to multiple Democratic aides, by revelations that Trump had told lawmakers during a private meeting that he wanted less immigration from “shithole” countries in Africa and more from places like Norway.

Schumer experienced a sea change after the remarks, according to one aide, who like other Democrats and Trump advisers, insisted on anonymity in order to describe private deliberations.

Some liberals fear the sea change is over.

“Today’s cave by Senate Democrats — led by weak-kneed, right-of-center Democrats — is why people don’t believe the Democratic Party stands for anything,” said Stephanie Taylor, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee.

“These weak Democrats hurt the party’s brand for everyone and make it harder to elect Democrats everywhere in 2018.”

Peoples reported from New York. Associated Press writers Andrew Taylor, Catherine Lucey, Alan Fram and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

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