

Case #12

Politicians have crossed the floor, or switched parties for as long as political parties have been in place—famous switches include those of Strom Thurmond, Ronald Reagan, Condoleezza Rice, Howard Dean, Hilary Clinton and most recently, Joe Lieberman. In 2001, nine serving members of Congress had switched parties while in office. Various reasons are cited for changing parties, including ideological disagreement with one's current party and moving to improve power and legislative efficacy, among others. U.S. Representative Ralph Hall of the Fourth Congressional District in Texas cites both reasons.

Ralph Hall was first elected in 1980 as a Democrat and has been re-elected each succeeding year. Hall has made a reputation for himself as a rogue Democrat, willing to “cross the aisle” and vote with Republicans when he agreed with their position. He also has been an avid supporter of President Bush, opposed to Democratic bids to unseat him. But it was more than mere ideological agreement that encouraged a decision to switch parties in early 2004 before his bid for reelection.

As Hall stated in a January 2004 press release that announced his decision to switch parties, “This year I was denied requests for district appropriations because I was a Democrat who voted against the bill. I have always stated that ... if being a Democrat hurt my district, I would either resign or switch parties.” The bill to which he was referring was a “foreign operations bill” which, according to Hall, gave, “financial support to those countries that continue to vote against [the U.S.] in the United Nations.”

Another motivation may be found in Hall's appreciation for being spared a potentially career devastating blow in the redistricting that cost many Democrats their seats in 2003. According to a CNN article, “...Hall's move comes after Republican state lawmakers in Austin spared him in a redistricting map that targets every other Anglo Democrat in the House. His district, based in the city of Tyler, was largely untouched by the GOP-drawn map, which is currently facing a Democratic court challenge.”