

Trying to Put ‘Popular’ Back in Populism

A group of House Democrats get together to promote economic policies that benefit the middle class

BY BEN WEYL

MUCH OF THE OUTRAGE in Congress over the past year’s wave of financial industry bailouts has so far been led by the leaders of the Republican minority, who have insisted that federal intervention in an economic crisis is bound to make things worse. But now there’s a bit of organized discontent on the Democratic side of the aisle: a collection of 25 House members who last month announced the formation of a new Populist Caucus with a goal of steering federal assistance a bit further away from top-heavy financial institutions and toward the interests of the middle class.

“I think that the way to look at it is: Why are we bailing out executives in boardrooms while their secretaries are being fired?” said Eric Massa, a freshman from upstate New York and a member of the caucus. “Why do we still have in this country case after case after case of million-dollar golden parachutes while the UAW autoworker loses his pension?”

Fifteen of the group’s members last fall voted against the original bank bailout that launched the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), and 16 supported legislation to block the second phase of TARP funding in January. On many other economic fronts, the fledgling group is firmly aligned with Democratic policy, endorsing a platform that supports universal medical coverage, more federal college-tuition assistance and tax cuts for the middle class. But as the divided vote on the TARP money shows, the new caucus might have trouble reaching and sustaining consensus on some top-tier economic policy issues, especially as Congress continues to grapple with new approaches to contain the damage of the steepening recession.

Certainly the group boasts no single ideological pedigree. Just over half the caucus hails from the Progressive Caucus, which has pro-



POPULIST FRONT: Rep. Leonard Boswell, an Iowa Democrat, at the caucus’s formal launch last month.

motated the most liberal agenda in the House since its founding in 1991. But five other members are conservative enough to associate also with either the fiscally conservative Blue Dog Coalition or the pro-business New Democrat Coalition.

The chairman of the new group, second-term Bruce Braley of Iowa, said the specter of internal dissent isn’t daunting — nor should it be for anyone in the party. “There are a lot of ideological differences here among members of the Democratic caucus, and yet there are a lot of common, shared values,” Braley said. “One of the things we’ve tried to do is try to bring more of a laser focus to these middle-class economic issues.”

It’s politically easy, especially early in the term of a popular president who’s generally of like mind, to pledge adherence to populist economic policy. But the idea of populism is notoriously elusive in American politics, the tag having been affixed to figures ranging

from Democrats William Jennings Bryan and Harry S Truman on through, in last year’s campaign, Republicans Sarah Palin and Samuel “Joe the Plumber” Wurzelbacher. So Braley’s challenge will be to retain his caucus’s “middle class” focus without also courting dissension within its ranks on issues that often drive populist-style political figures out of the mainstream.

THE TRADE TEST

An early test of that strategy will be trade policy. The economic downturn has fueled growing skepticism of trade-liberalizing accords — one of the signal economic legacies of the Clinton-era New Democrats — and moved support for labor and environmental restrictions in the name of “fair trade,” if not outright protectionism, into the congressional mainstream.

The caucus opposes negotiating trade deals that don’t bind the other country to enforcing

significant anti-pollution and worker-rights regulations. And caucus leaders hailed indications from the White House last week that President Obama intends to pursue stiffer trade agreements to protect American manufacturing interests, such as the struggling auto industry.

Indeed, the House's Trade Working Group is co-chaired by Michael H. Michaud of Maine, a Populist Caucus member. He recently sent a letter urging the president to renegotiate both the North American and Central American free-trade agreements and

to put on hold pending efforts to finalize bilateral trade deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea left over by the Bush administration. Of the 53 other representatives signing the letter, 17 were from the Populist Caucus. Braley said that "trade is a good thing for our economy" but added that it's key to make sure the terms of the agreements are fair — and enforceable. "There's a difference between having things down on paper in a trade agreement and having your trading partner actually enforce the law and making something that has teeth."

The caucus is likely to have "a huge amount of impact" on the coming trade debate, according to David Sirota, a Democratic strategist and author of "The Uprising," a liberal populist tract. The main issue for lawmakers in that group will be "whether they can simply stop bad bills from coming to the floor," by pressuring the larger Democratic caucus, he said. "And I think that they have a lot of leverage there. A lot of these members are from swing districts that Democrats need to hold on to in order to maintain their majorities."

Massa expects that he and other caucus members suspicious of free-trade policy will be tangling with the Democratic leadership on the issue. "There will be tension, and I think we'll be successful. I don't see tension as being a bad thing," the congressman said.

That confident outlook may stem in part from the caucus' dealings with leadership so far. Early on in negotiations over the economic stimulus package, Braley and other caucus members wrote to urge Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland to preserve strong "Buy American" provisions and an extension of the Trade Adjustment Assistance program. They

Who's in the Group

The House's so-far all Democratic Populist Caucus, formed last month, has some members who also belong to fiscally conservative groups. But half the 25 current members are also in the liberal Progressive Caucus.

■ *Progressive Caucus* ■ *Blue Dog Coalition* □ *New Democrats*

Michael Arcuri of New York ■ □	Marcy Kaptur of Ohio ■
Leonard L. Boswell of Iowa ■	Dave Loebsack of Iowa ■
Bruce Braley of Iowa □	Eric Massa of New York
Steve Cohen of Tennessee ■	Michael H. Michaud of Maine ■
Joe Courtney of Connecticut □	Tom Perriello of Virginia
Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon ■	Linda T. Sánchez of California ■
Lloyd Doggett of Texas	Jan Schakowsky of Illinois ■
Keith Ellison of Minnesota ■	Carol Shea-Porter of New Hampshire
Bob Filner of California ■	Louise M. Slaughter of New York ■
Phil Hare of Illinois ■	Betty Sutton of Ohio
Mazie K. Hirono of Hawaii ■	Peter Welch of Vermont ■
Hank Johnson of Georgia ■	John Yarmuth of Kentucky
Steve Kagen of Wisconsin	

got both wishes, although the "Buy American" language was limited, at Obama's urging.

Going forward, some caucus members expect that they will continue to find fault with White House efforts to rescue the financial industry, such as in Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner's plan last month to pump another \$2 trillion in combined public and private funds into the reeling bank and credit sectors. He may be able to sidestep Congress because of the sweeping authority Treasury was given in the TARP law. But the idea is far from popular among the middle-class voters the Populist Caucus seeks to represent.

"I can tell you, based upon some of the conversations I'm having, that people are going to be very skeptical, and they are going to demand answers about how money was handled on the first TARP bailout," Braley said. "Until those concerns are addressed to their satisfaction, there's going to be a reluctance to support some of those issues."

PINNING DOWN 'POPULISM'

Sixteen of the caucus members are comparative newcomers to Congress — "majority makers" in the words of Pelosi — having won their first election in 2006 or 2008, some by slim margins. For politically vulnerable congressmen, joining the Populist Caucus, as opposed to the Progressive Caucus, could help them hold swing seats.

"It's probably easier to sell in some parts of the country than a word like 'progressive' and certainly a word like 'liberal,'" said Michael Kazin, a Georgetown University historian and the author of "A Godly Hero," a William Jennings Bryan biography. "It doesn't right away scream at you, 'I'm on the left' — or, for that matter, the right."

Sirota agrees that the idea of populism doesn't map onto conventional left-right political divisions. "To throw one and half trillion dollars at Wall Street is not liberal — and to oppose it is not necessarily liberal." As an aide in the House to Vermont's Bernard Sanders, an independent who has described himself as a socialist, he worked with conservative Republicans to try to stop a law extending normal trade relations to China. "I don't think that these issues and that term 'populist' as it's defined by this new caucus is just a euphemism for progressive or liberal. I really think

it means something different," Sirota said.

Political thinkers on the right endorse their own version of the term. "It's an affirmative view of traditional values," according to Jeffrey Bell, a visiting fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and author of "Populism and Elitism." "That it's premature to start taking away, ripping away the things that we grew up believing. It's unjustified, and somebody has to stick up for Middle America."

That description explains the appeal of Palin, whose "emergence was a very populist phenomenon," Bell said. Braley concurs, despite his "stark disagreements" about policy with the Alaska governor and 2008 GOP vice-presidential candidate. "I think that on some levels, the Sarah Palin phenomenon is definitely a reflection of populist values," Braley said. "If you go out to my district in Iowa, there are many people who feel like other parts of the country ignore some of the critical issues that are affecting their lives. They want somebody who is going to talk to them in a language they can relate to, who's going to fight for them."

The challenge for the new caucus may well be to harness such stylistic appeals to populist values in the service of an economic agenda identified with traditional labor and progressive constituencies. "I think there's a quiet anger about the inequities," Massa said, "about the hijacked American dream." ■

FOR FURTHER READING: *Economic stimulus (PL 111-5)*, *CQ Weekly*, p. 352; *release of bailout money (HR 384)*, p. 195; *social contract*, p. 118; *trade background*, p. 222, *2008 CQ Weekly*, pp. 3286, 3230; *financial bailout (PL 110-343)*, *2008 CQ Weekly*, p. 3270; *Palin's appeal*, p. 2356; *China trade law (PL 106-286)*, *2000 Almanac*, p. 20-3.