

bill johnson

Johnson: Markey says she voted her conscience on health bill

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It took a while, but I finally caught up with Betsy Markey on Tuesday. The woman has guts.

I was among those firmly convinced the opposite was true, that she was just one more politician doing, saying and voting whatever and whichever way was the most beneficial to her holding on to power.

Her vote last year against health care reform, I figured, was little more than a transparently bald attempt by the freshman House Democrat to woo voters in the GOP- leaning 4th Congressional District who probably were not going to vote for her anyway.

On Sunday, she flipped her vote and was among

the 219 Democrats in the House of Representatives who passed health-care reform, a bill that received the backing of — and this still floors me — not a SINGLE one of 178 House Republicans.

What happened? I asked her.

"I read the bill," Markey said.

The initial House version simply was anathema to her. It contained little cost containment and would be unaffordable to small business owners like herself. She couldn't support it, she said.

The Senate version of the bill encouraged her. It made providing health care affordable for small businesses with less than 50 employees — that's 96 percent of all U.S. small businesses, she said.

The Congressional Budget Office estimate that the plan would reduce budget deficits by \$143 billion over a decade, and more than \$1.2 trillion over the second 10 years "sealed it for me," she said.

She laughed at suggestions the White House had pressured her to change her vote, that promises had been made, that there had to be shenanigans somehow involved.

"There was nothing," Markey said. "I had not talked to the president about this. There was no arm-twisting involved. The only time I ever spoke to the president is when he called to thank me for my vote."

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The reaction in her district to the vote, she said, has been "very, very mixed. A lot of people, as expected, are upset with me. A lot have called to congratulate me. But there is also a lot of confusion out there over what the bill really means, and how it will affect people."

In the months leading up to the November election, she said her job will be to get out in the district and answer questions about what it means.

There will be more town hall meetings with groups and over the telephone. She knows her district, she said. She knows the work she has ahead.

We talk for a long time, of how she is now the poster child for vulnerable swing-district Democrats, of how her opponents are busy writing her political obituary. Finally, she stops.

"Whatever happens, happens," Markey said. "You know, we all have to live with ourselves."

"Ten years from now, I don't want to regret making a vote centered solely on political considerations. I have to get up every morning and look at my children."

"I know my vote was the right thing to do."

In the years to come, I wonder if 178 Republican and 34 Democratic members of Congress will say the same thing.

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