



Photo by Justin Merriman

MANCHIN IN THE MIDDLE

West Virginia senator was brought into leadership team to ensure he stays a Democrat. He promises to be more than a mere 'token conservative'

Salena Zito, Political Correspondent

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Joe Manchin said not a day goes by that someone doesn't ask him if he wants to switch from Democrat to Republican.

Every day? "Every day," he answers.

From colleagues in Washington to Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the senior U.S. senator from the Mountaineer State is persistently but politely nudged to make the leap.

Has he ever considered it? "Not one day," he said.

"I am not far Right, and I am not far Left. I am a proud West Virginia Democrat and I would be dishonest to myself and the people who voted for me if I changed parties," he said.

Sitting in a circular turquoise booth at Taylor Books in downtown Charleston, W.Va., in the shadow of the state capitol where he once held what he

called "the best job in America" as the state's governor, Manchin is adamant that there has to be a place for conservative-to-moderate Democrats in Washington.

Enter newly elected Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York, who found such a place for Manchin in his leadership team.

"It was basically a put-up-or-shut-up proposition," said Manchin of how he found his way onto the Senate minority leadership team. It's an unlikely place for an outspoken moderate in a left-of-center party.

Manchin leans forward to tell his story as folks courteously greet him as they patronize the 120-year-old former shoe store that now houses a book store, local artisan's pottery and paintings and

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an upscale coffee shop. It's stacked with muffins and scones made every morning at 4:30 by the store's 82-year-old, English-born owner Ann Saville.

"Let me tell you how it all happened," he begins. "There is a tug of war going on. Everybody in the party thinks they must go further to the left. I don't think this is about going to the left or the right. It's just that our message was not accepted in a genuine, sincere manner," he said of the frenzy of Democratic members' responses after losing not only the presidential race, but their chance at the Senate majority.

Democrats also came nowhere near chipping away effectively at the Republicans' House majority and now have lost 919 state legislative seats in the past eight years, giving the once-vaunted party of the working class the smallest minority in nearly 100 years.

"People didn't believe in us. They did not buy into our message," he said of his party's attempts to win the presidency and rebuild its majority.

"As far as Bernie [Sanders] and his troops who believe that if he had been the nominee he would have won? I think there would have been the passion, but I don't think that he would have won the presidency," Manchin said.

Manchin, who calls Schumer a friend, said the two men were talking after the

election when he articulated to the New York senator how he felt about the results.

"I told him, 'I have to be honest with you, the far Left is not speaking for me or the conservative Democrats I represent. I am an American first. As far as the D and the R goes, well that comes way down on the list for me,'" he said.

"I am there [in the Senate] to get things done. And I am going to get things done, but if you think Bernie is going to be preaching the mantra of who I am, well that is not me."

Manchin said he told Schumer he planned on vocalizing his positions if things get heated. "If Bernie is wrong, I am going to be speaking out hard and strong against him," he said of Sanders.

"Schumer's response was if I felt that strongly about it, why didn't I join his leadership team?

"And that is how I got to be in leadership," he said.

'HORRIBLE' CLINTON MOMENT

In the 228 miles between the Pennsylvania state line and the West Virginia state capitol, the evidence of President-elect Trump's dominance in this once-powerful Democratic-led state still remains two weeks after Election Day. Stray signs still stand proudly in people's yards and along the rolling

Sens. Joe Manchin and Harry Reid have been at odds since 2010, when the former governor came to the Senate. The friction has escalated since Reid released blistering remarks about President-elect Trump. Manchin's relationship with Minority Leader Chuck Schumer is much different. They share a passion for getting things done.

AP PHOTO

mountain back roads.

Trump crushed Hillary Clinton here Nov. 8, winning nearly 70 percent of the vote. The sweep came two years ahead of the steadfast Clinton supporter's own re-election contest in November 2018.

It was a backing he maintained even after she made those "horrific" remarks where she promised to kill all coal jobs in the state.

"I was consumed with anger when she blurted that out," Manchin said. "I had talked to her just a couple weeks before about how we were losing all of our coal mining jobs and the ancillary jobs that go along with them."

"I stressed to her that companies were going broke and I don't know if they'll ever come back or be resurrected again."

Clinton committed to him that she would deploy her husband Bill to the state within the first 100 days of her administration and bring back a series of big projects that included comprehensive broadband for the mountainous state, along with highway projects in southern West Virginia.

"And the icing on the cake was a big beautiful hydro-dam that would open up recreation activities so our people can diversify their economy, and also bring in some revenue coming from the power," he said.

"When she turned around and made that statement two weeks later, I got so damn mad, you know how you just react?" he said.

Both Clintons called and apologized. Manchin told the former president, "Why don't we just remain friends and go our separate ways?"

He told Hillary, "There is absolutely no way I can defend what you said, there's also no way that you can make it right. Damage is done. That is not who we are, and I hope that is not what you think of us. I just think it's best we part ways."

Her response was a firm no, and she asked to come back to the state. She did, but as he told her, the damage was already done, to both her and him.

"It was horrible. People saw me with her and they called me 'Traitor Joe.' People who I have known all my life were calling me these names, people who I have worked with and I have supported them and they have supported me," he said shaking his head.

Manchin stuck with her for the promises to help his state. "That was what I was elected to do, but if this election was about me, well I would have gone the other way," he said of supporting Trump over her.

DECONSTRUCTING HARRY

Not even McConnell can match Manchin's enthusiasm for the departure of Harry Reid from the halls of the Capitol.

Manchin and Reid have been at odds since the former governor came to the Senate in 2010 in a special election, a friction that caused him to almost leave the Senate seat and seek his old governor's office back.

It escalated after the election when Reid released blistering remarks about the president-elect, calling him a sexual predator who lost the popular vote and fuels bigotry and hatred.

Manchin slammed Reid publicly. "I want to be very clear, he does not speak for me ... His words needlessly feed the very divisiveness that is tearing this country apart," he said.

Sitting at the book store one week later, he still bristles at Reid's decision to be so divisive. "His behavior is just so embarrassing," he said.

His relationship with Schumer is much different, and despite their vastly different backgrounds, they share a passion for getting things done.

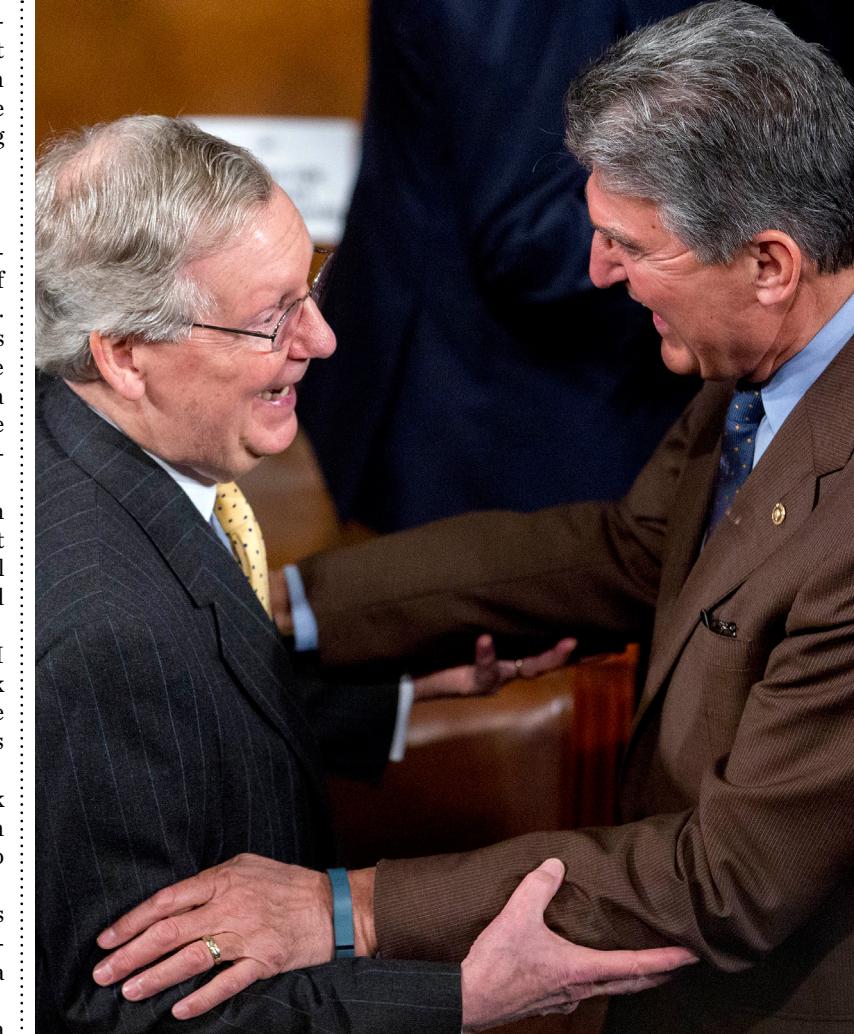
"Chuck will look at anything in a pragmatic way and look for a pathway forward to get things done," Manchin said.

"When Schumer asked me to join the leadership, I told him I am not going to be a token conservative on your membership team. But if you have me as a trusted friend, I will tell you exactly what is going on and make sure that you have every opportunity to succeed," he said.

Schumer outlined Manchin's strengths, such as his ability to reach across the aisle and his resistance to campaign against his Republican peers for Democratic candidate gains.

Schumer's proposal? Be his liaison to find out where they could move forward on pieces of legislation. "Where a deal is to be had, whether it be Paul Ryan in the House or Mitch McConnell in the Senate, you're that guy," Manchin said, explaining the minority leader's pitch.

Manchin considered and decided to accept. "It is a tremendous honor and



opportunity to maybe heal the wounds of the country."

2018

One day after the election, Manchin said dozens of his friends called to tell him they received a robo-call that pitted him against every Republican elected official in the state for an election to be held two years from now.

He expects every single one of them to take a run at him in a Republican primary. "A little healthy competition is good. I am happy to campaign on my record from the mistakes I have made and also the successes we have had," he said.

Manchin knows that his appointment to leadership as he faces re-election is both a blessing and a curse. "And I am willing to take the challenge."

His party faces defending 10 senators up for re-election in 2018 in states Trump carried, some unequivocally

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