

Jim Cooper (D)

District 5, Tennessee

A self-described "nerd," Cooper has become an increasingly outspoken Democratic advocate of deficit reduction and a budget process overhaul. He is among his party's most experienced fiscal experts, having logged more than a decade in Congress and then eight years in the financial world before he returned to Capitol Hill for a whole new round in 2003.

Cooper has used his seat on the Budget Committee to spotlight one of his biggest gripes - the calculation of the federal budget on a cash accounting basis that reflects current expenditures and revenues only.

Cooper argues that only accrual accounting that recognizes statutory commitments to future spending, such as Social Security and Medicare obligations, can show the true condition of the federal budget. In fiscal 2005, he noted, the reported deficit was \$319 billion on a cash basis, but it was \$760 billion if calculated by the accrual method. Calling the use of cash accounting "misleading," Cooper succeeded in persuading the Budget Committee in 2006 to adopt an amendment requiring use of accrual accounting. He wrote the foreword for a subsequent book, "The Financial Report of the United States," that explained the differences in the numbers.

Cooper has championed what he regards as other common-sense budget approaches, including an unsuccessful push to require congressional earmarks to be included in the text of legislation instead of buried in accompanying committee reports. (When it comes to earmarks for his own district, Cooper reveals in advance the list of projects for which he wants funding.)

He also called for a return to pay-as-you-go budget rules requiring both tax cuts and spending increases to be offset. House Democrats adopted the budget rules when they gained power in the 110th Congress (2007-08). Earlier, he broke with his party to support a White House-backed measure that would have allowed the president to rescind a package of spending items or tax provisions affecting a single person or entity, and receive an expedited up-or-down vote in both chambers without amendments.

Cooper, a member of the Blue Dog Coalition of conservative House Democrats, splits with his party on a variety of issues ranging from trade to gun control. He served as the coalition's policy

co-chairman in the 109th Congress (2005-06). Early in 2007, he even split with most Blue Dogs when he was unable to get their backing for a budget plan that called for the extension of some soon-to-expire tax breaks and cuts in some entitlement programs. He wound up casting the lone Democratic vote for a competing GOP budget plan to cut entitlements and freeze other domestic spending.

"I'm not a very ideological person. Practicality is the hallmark," Cooper said when he returned to Capitol Hill in 2003. He found a much-altered Congress, one in which bitter partisanship had replaced cooperation across party lines. He told The Tennessean newspaper how shocked he was at the chilly reception he got from Budget Committee Republicans during a break in a hearing in 2003. "A lot of Republicans wouldn't even say hello, and here you are eating pizza right next to them," he said.

On the Armed Services Committee, Cooper has regularly joined other Democrats in rebuking the Bush administration for what they consider poor planning to rebuild postwar Iraq. He has called the Pentagon's endeavors there "a stunning case of mismanagement."

Republicans aren't the only ones to draw criticism from Cooper. He caused a stir among Democrats in a candid assessment to the Washington Post of his party's struggles to win over disgruntled voters. "The comment I hear is, 'I'd really like to vote for you guys, but I can't stand the folks I see on TV,'" he told the newspaper. He later explained in an interview that the party needs to better identify its best messengers and let them speak for the party: "The public can't understand 208 voices. We need [lawmakers] who look and act the part."

Cooper said his frustration with current conditions on Capitol Hill grows out of his longtime affection for government. His father, Prentice, was Tennessee's governor in the 1960s, and Cooper grew up with an eye toward public service. He made it through the University of North Carolina in just three years, attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, then picked up a law degree from Harvard. After practicing law for two years, he ran for an open House seat in 1982 against Sen. Howard Baker's daughter Cissy and won easily, becoming at age 28 the youngest member of the House.

Despite his youthfulness, Cooper developed a reputation as a skilled dealmaker. From his seat on the Energy and Commerce Committee, he was a key player on issues ranging from health care to telecommunications policy to clean air. But when he ran for the Senate in 1994, he was trounced by actor and attorney Fred Thompson.

Cooper then took a break from politics. He entered the investment-banking world and taught business at the Owen Graduate School of

Management at Vanderbilt University. He says all lawmakers ought to be more knowledgeable about financial issues, noting that even members of the Armed Services panel need to understand the business world in looking at procurement. "The private sector experience is the best thing to happen to me," he said. "I'm so much better informed on issues than I was before."

When a House seat in Tennessee opened up in 2002 after Democrat Bob Clement decided to run for the Senate, Cooper jumped at the chance for a comeback. Despite surgery in June 2002 to remove a tumor from his colon - doctors said the cancer had not spread - Cooper won the August primary with 47 percent of the vote to 24 percent for his closest competitor. He captured 64 percent that November against businessman Robert Duvall, and has had no trouble holding the seat since then.

Although white-majority urban Democratic districts are located mainly in Democratic "blue" states, Cooper's district, based in the state capital of Nashville, is an exception. The area has historic ties to a founder of the Democratic Party: "In Tennessee, the district has often been called the Andrew Jackson district," Cooper notes.

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