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The Senator from western Wisconsin shares lessons learned in 2019 and his hope for cooperative shared government. He'll be writing about 2019 reflections and his hopes for 2020 for the next three weeks.

BRUNSWICK, WI - This time of year offers an important opportunity to reflect and be grateful for the experiences we've earned. It's been an honor serving as your state senator this year. As I returned from my last Madison trip of 2019, I had so much to think about, including the lessons learned, accomplishments made and what to look forward to in 2020.

For the next three weeks, I'll be writing about my 2019 reflections and what drives me to serve the 31st Senate District. This past year created so many opportunities to learn from advocates, constituents and my legislative colleagues.

When this year began, I knew this would be a year of learning for myself and the entire legislature. After all, this was the first year Wisconsin had shared government since the 2007-2008 session, when Republicans controlled the Assembly, Democrats controlled the Senate and there was a Democratic governor.

I cringe when people call shared government divided government. Democracy is supposed to be messy, it's supposed to be deliberate. Putting aside our ambitions and doing our part in the

democratic process isn't about division, it's about finding unity.

In 2018, before officially taking office, I attended a legislative forum with area leaders. During the forum, I explained the reality of the situation: to get a committee hearing scheduled or a bill passed, I'd need support from Republicans, like the senator I was sitting next to. The Republican senator quickly replied, letting me know my help would be needed to prevent their bills from being vetoed. This optimistic conversation gave me hope of a cooperative environment within the Capitol.



However, my initial expectations fell far short of what happened this year. Stripping the Governor and Attorney General of power during the Lame Duck Session set a bad precedent and an uncooperative tone. The state senate only met 9 times in 2019, without bringing up important policy proposals, including Medicaid expansion or closing the dark store loophole. Less Senate floor sessions isn't a bad thing if committees are thoroughly vetting policy and producing quality legislation. But this hasn't been the case.

This year, I became the Ranking Democratic member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Financial Institutions and Revenue, a responsibility I take very seriously.

During the final Committee hearing of the year, we were scheduled to debate and vote on three bills relating to labeling dairy and meat products. These bills stem from farmers' concerns for consumers not understanding the labeling for plant-based foods and imitation animal products. I understand we aren't saving lives or farms with such legislation, but it's something we can agree on that may help famers know we care about protecting Wisconsin's proud agricultural legacy.

Under these bills, a grocer could be imprisoned if they sell products that are labeled as milk, cheese or meat if they aren't produced by a mammal or come from an animal. Before we voted on these bills, I introduced amendments to remove the bill's imprisonment penalty. Typically, in committee, we discuss and vote on the amendments and pass the bills with or without the amendments. Instead of following this procedure, the Republican Committee Chair ruled he wouldn't even consider a vote on the amendments.

Even a member from his own party spoke against this process. Additionally, Senator Risser, the longest serving legislator in the nation, stated “I can safely say that if it has happened, it is a rare occurrence. The Chairman’s failure to allow deliberation of amendments perverts the very nature of committee meetings, to scrutinize legislation before it is sent to the full Senate for final review.”

This entire session, I’ve tried to say we have shared government to acknowledge the need for bipartisanship, but it feels more like divided government. Despite setbacks in 2019, I will renew my optimism for the good government concept of cooperation in 2020.

I’ve met advocates who have inspired my hope and lifelong endeavor to continue learning. My office has become my classroom where I learn from people of all backgrounds and identities. In next week’s column, I’ll share how conversations with others and lessons learned resulted in accomplishments over the last year.