

Bill Bradley

Bill Bradley was first elected to the United States Senate from New Jersey in 1978, and held that office until his retirement in 1996. Bradley was a member of the Senate Finance Committee, and was widely acknowledged as the Senate's leading champion of progressive tax reform.

Vote History:

1981: The 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (HR 4242), President Reagan's "supply-side" tax plan, made the tax code far less progressive and was the primary cause of the huge budget deficits that emerged in the eighties. The bill passed the Senate by a vote of 68 to 9, with 23 Senators not voting. Senator Bradley voted against HR 4242. In explaining his opposition to the bill as passed by the Senate in July, Bradley cited his belief that the bill, "coupled with the administration's rigid adherence to extreme monetary policies and steep increases in military spending . . . is a recipe for higher inflation, higher interest rates and much larger deficits." He also cited the bill's "failure to give more tax relief to individuals earning under \$50,000."¹

The best vote on the conference committee report of ERTA was "NO." Bradley voted "NO."

1982: The Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act (HR 4961) represented an important first step toward repudiating the 1981 tax act. Most of the bill's revenue-increasing measures closed tax loopholes, an approach that provided a blueprint for the larger-scale loophole-closing provisions later adopted in the 1986 Tax Reform Act. Senator Bradley voted against HR 4961 as originally passed by the Senate, and voted in favor of the conference committee version. The Senate version passed by a 50-47 vote, and the conference committee version passed by a 52-47 vote. Early in the debate over the Senate version of the bill, Bradley expressed his concern that the bill "is regressive, and . . . hits those individuals who are least insulated from the recession that we find ourselves in. . . . I would move to make this tax bill a fairer tax bill."² Bradley submitted several amendments to HR 4961 designed to achieve this by eliminating the Senate bill's increases in unemployment taxes and excise taxes. Immediately preceding the Senate vote on passage of the original Senate Finance bill, Bradley reiterated his equity objections to the bill, noting that "[w]hile some of the bill's provisions merit the label 'tax reform,' many of them unfairly and unnecessarily

¹Congressional Record, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (July 29, 1981), 17969.

²Congressional Record, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (July 20, 1982), 17009.

burden low and middle income taxpayers.³”

Bradley qualified his opposition to the Senate bill by noting that “[n]otwithstanding my objections to the bill, I am encouraged that the supply siders’ willingness to correct at least some of [the 1981 tax bill’s] excesses signals a new, more promising direction. . . . We cannot afford to lower taxes unless we close loopholes at the same time.⁴”

The best vote on the conference committee report of TEFRA was “YES.” Bradley voted “YES.”

1984: The Deficit Reduction Act of 1984 (HR 4170) represented a substantial step toward deficit reduction, adding \$103 billion to revenues over ten years, mainly by closing unwarranted loopholes. Bradley voted in favor of HR 4170, which passed the Senate by a vote of 83 to 15.

The best vote on the conference committee report of DEFRA was “YES.” Bradley voted “YES.”

1986: The Tax Reform Act of 1986 was a monumental piece of tax reform legislation, which closed corporate tax loopholes and lowered income tax rates, while maintaining revenues and enhancing progressivity. Overall, the bill closed an estimated \$500 billion in loopholes over five years, and used those revenues to reduce tax rates. Senator Bradley voted in favor of HR 3838, which passed the Senate by a vote of 74 to 23. Bradley’s leadership was essential, as legislation co-sponsored by Bradley and Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-MO) was the blueprint for the 1986 Act as finally enacted.

The best vote on final passage of the conference committee report was “YES.” Bradley voted “YES.”

1987: The Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1987 (HR 3545) was a comparatively modest deficit reduction bill. Most of the revenues needed to meet the budget targets were raised through further corporate tax reforms, plus small increases in various federal excise taxes. As a result, the overall bill was generally progressive in its distribution. Senator Bradley voted in favor of the conference committee version of HR 3545, which the Senate enacted by a vote of 61 to 28.

The best vote on the conference report of OBRA was “YES.” Bradley voted “YES.”

³Congressional Record, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (July 22, 1982), 17672.

⁴*Ibid.*, 17672.

1990: The Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1990 raised income taxes on high earners, boosted some excise taxes and expanded the earned-income tax credit for lower-income working families. Because the new top income tax rate of 31 percent did not apply to capital gains, however, the bill restored a tax break for capital gains, which remained taxed at a maximum of 28 percent. Overall, the OBRA tax increases were progressive in their impact and helped reduce the budget deficit. Senator Bradley voted against HR 5835. The bill passed the Senate by a vote of 54 to 45. In final Senate deliberations over the conference committee’s bill, Bradley based his opposition to the bill on its inclusion of “higher taxes for middle-income taxpayers, new tax loopholes for oil and energy investors, continued spending on obsolete defense missions, and additional burdens on the aged and the sick.”⁵ He later reiterated that the bill “raises taxes on middle-income families, and it does so in order to give away new tax breaks for wealthy oil and energy investors. That is wrong and it is unfair.” Bradley also argued that “[w]e should reduce the deficit by closing tax loopholes, not by opening new ones.”

Bradley did note that there were things about the bill he liked—most notably, the absence of a large cut in the capital gains rate and the presence of a slight hike in the top tax rate—but said that “while these improvements are worth noting, and should be applauded, they are not enough to transform a bad budget bill into a good bill.”

In deliberations on the bill that initially emerged from the Senate Finance Committee, Bradley emphasized his opposition to “the inclusion of a capital gains tax cut in any package that comes out of the conference.”⁶ He clarified that “I think that it is important to treat all income the same” and noted that “people who [earn] over \$200,000 a year . . . take 65 percent of the capital gains.”⁷

The best vote on the conference committee report was “YES.” Bradley voted “NO.”

1992: The Urban Aid Tax Bill of 1992 (HR 11) was initially conceived as a response to the Los Angeles riots of early 1992, but was ultimately transformed mainly into a mixed bag of loophole-opening and loophole-closing measures. Senator Bradley voted against HR 11. The bill passed the Senate by a vote of 67 to 22, and was subsequently vetoed by President Bush. Sen. Bradley had been a strong proponent of provisions in the bill that would create “urban enterprise zones,” and made clear that his opposition to HR 11 was due entirely to the inclusion of other provisions: he noted that “this is a \$30 billion urban aid bill that spends only \$5.8 billion on urban aid [I]f this bill had remained just a limited urban aid bill, I could have

⁵Congressional Record, October 27, 1990, 36233.

⁶Congressional Record, October 18, 1990, 30625.

⁷Congressional Record, October 18, 1990. 30626

supported it. Unfortunately, it did not. We spend about as much to extend the so-called expiring provisions as we do on urban assistance.⁸” Bradley also argued against the Congressional practice of renewing “extenders” on a short-term basis, noting that “[k]eeping these provisions in limbo is clearly bad tax policy and the time is long overdue to extend the good ones permanently and let the others expire once and for all.⁹”

Bradley finally noted that “because I believe this bill spends too little on our urban crisis and too much on loopholes primarily used by wealthy Americans and corporations—because I believe this bill will add to our budget deficit and harm our prospects for real growth—I cannot vote for it.¹⁰”

The best vote on the conference committee report was “NO.” Bradley voted “NO.”

1993: The Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1993 (HR 2264) represented a major step toward deficit reduction and increased progressivity in the tax system. Bradley voted in favor of HR 2264. A 50-50 vote in the Senate was resolved by the tie-breaking vote of Vice-President Gore, who voted to pass the bill. Bradley’s support of the bill was partially due to the inclusion of provisions establishing tax incentives for “empowerment zones” and “enterprise communities.” In expressing his support for the bill, Bradley noted that similar legislation introduced by Bradley earlier in 1993 “laid the groundwork¹¹” for the HR 2264 empowerment zone provisions. Bradley qualified his support for the bill by noting that it did not reflect a “defining principle” that “provides guidance and assures consistency.” He pointed out that “[i]t asks for more from those who have earned more, but it gives a lot back in tax breaks. It raises the gas tax, but not in a way that would reduce consumption. It cuts Medicare, but offers no systemic approach on other entitlements.¹²” In expressing his ultimate support for the bill, he noted that “[t]here will never again be a \$500 billion deficit reduction package that asks less of the middle class than this package does today.¹³”

The best vote on the conference committee report was “YES.” Bradley voted “YES.”

1997,1999: Bradley left the Congress in 1996.

⁸Congressional Record, September 29, 1992, 28729.

⁹Congressional Record, September 29, 1992, 28729.

¹⁰Congressional Record, September 29, 1992, 28729.

¹¹Congressional Record, August 6, 1993, at 19838.

¹²Congressional Record, 19789 (August 6, 1993)

¹³Congressional Record, 19789.