

Caroline Kennedy and the U.S. Senate

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Although I live in New York and used to be reasonably involved in politics here, the question of who David Paterson will appoint to the Senate is not one about which I have a strong opinion. I am confident that almost all the candidates who Paterson is seriously considering would almost certainly vote the same way on the major issues and all would start at the bottom of an institution where it takes some time to accrue real power—even for those with a famous last name. If you don't believe that, ask Hillary Clinton.

I do, however, appreciate the irony of Governor Paterson agonizing over a tough decision about who to appoint to a Senate seat which many thought would be his. Two and a half years ago, when Paterson agreed to serve as the running mate for then Democratic gubernatorial candidate Eliot Spitzer, it was broadly believed in New York political circles that Paterson was giving up his position in the Democratic leadership of the New York State Senate to help Spitzer with the understanding that when Hillary Clinton left the Senate to go to the White House, Spitzer would appoint Paterson to Clinton's vacated Senate seat. Things didn't work out quite that way.

Now, of course, what began as a question over whether Paterson would pick one of a handful of qualified members of the House of Representatives, or the sitting Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, has given way to a livelier debate over the merits of Caroline Kennedy. Who would have thought that Andrew Cuomo would be the candidate with only the second most famous political father—and a distant second at that?

Kennedy's candidacy for the Senate raises the issue of what qualities we should look for when choosing a senator. It seems that simply the ability to rise up the ranks of Democratic Party politics in New York State should not be the preeminent qualification. These skills are certainly helpful with regard to legislative and political matters, but they should not be confused with the vision and judgment needed to be a great senator.

The most commonly used argument against Caroline Kennedy is that she hasn't earned it, which is another way of saying she hasn't worked her way up through the party structures. To this I would raise the question "So What?" Why should any voter care about whether or not a candidate has earned anything? Being appointed to the US Senate is not like receiving a scholarship to college or even a job promotion, although being a senator is a great job. In other words it is not a decision that should be based retrospectively on merit, but prospectively on what that candidate will do in the Senate, and the notion that great senators need to have years of experience in elected office should not be just taken at face value. If Paterson thinks Caroline Kennedy can do the most for New York and for our country than he should appoint her. Obviously, political considerations, a balanced ticket, future electability and the like are all important too, but nobody is saying Kennedy is a bad candidate because she will bring the party down in 2010.

The notion that it would somehow be unfair to appoint Kennedy because she has not toiled in the House of Representatives for a decade should not be one that ordinary voters take seriously because it has no bearing on us. That is in argument for the insiders. You don't hear it said too frequently that somebody would have been a great senator if only she had served three terms in the House first. The Senate lends itself quite well to on the job training, especially given that new senators start at the bottom of the seniority ladder.

While I generally prefer candidates who do not come from political families, it seems a little peculiar for New York political leadership to become sensitive to this issue now. We are a state whose governor is the son of a famous political leader, junior senator is the wife of a former president and attorney general is the son of a former governor. In this regard Caroline Kennedy would be nothing new, although her name would be even more famous than the Cuomos, Clintons and Patersons which populate the state's current leadership.

Caroline Kennedy would probably be a very good US Senator, but she is not the only candidate about whom that can be said. Nydia Velazquez and Carolyn Maloney, just to name two, are both hard working progressive women who would also serve our state well in the Senate. In this regard, Paterson has a tough choice, but he should make it based on who will be the best senator, not on some insider's game of who has paid what dues.