Ashley Judd Could Be a Problem for Mitch McConnell

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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Ashley Judd's all but declared Senate campaign has the potential to have an impact far beyond Kentucky politics. Her candidacy will not be uncontroversial. As a movie star with a national profile and as a supporter of progressive causes, she may not look like the ideal candidate to unseat a Republican incumbent -- albeit an increasingly unpopular one -- in a solidly red state like Kentucky. This, however, is what makes Judd's Senate campaign intriguing and indeed important.

Over the next 20 months, the campaign for Senate in Kentucky will undoubtedly become very nasty as Judd will seek to expose McConnell as a right-winger who has spent most of the last decade working for interests that are distinctly not those of the people of Kentucky. McConnell, in turn, will try to overstate the extent to which Judd is an outsider and a creature of the liberal Hollywood elite. The campaign due to Judd's celebrity and McConnell's position will become a national campaign with very high stakes.

It is true that Judd has spent years in the film industry, has ties to Hollywood and also has lived in Tennessee in recent years, but her roots in Kentucky, and strong ties to that state are clear. Judd is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and probably the most visible and enthusiastic fan of that university's basketball team (much to the chagrin of anybody who follows her on Twitter but, like me, cares little about college basketball). More significantly, Judd has strong family ties to Kentucky and comes from a background that gives her a strong understanding of the economic problems and challenges facing people in Kentucky.

Defeating Mitch McConnell, a powerful Senate Republican, will not be easy. Judd will have to work hard, raise a lot of money and get a few breaks to get elected, but it is certainly doable. Nonetheless, Judd's candidacy is a risky one to be sure. Some would argue that a conservative Democrat who has not taken strong progressive positions, but who has spent decades working at local politics in Kentucky would be better positioned to beat McConnell. Judd is not that conventional candidate. Her strong positives including name recognition, charisma, keen understanding of both local and global problems and willingness to take clear positions on important issues are also the roots of her vulnerability. She has said and done a lot of things in the last decade which have allowed her to become an important progressive spokesperson, but now leave her vulnerable to Republican attacks of being a carpetbagger, Hollywood liberal and the like.

On balance Judd can become a strong candidate. If she wins, her victory will resonate well beyond Kentucky. If a progressive like Judd is able to unseat a powerful Republican senator in a
conservative state like Kentucky it will be unambiguous evidence of the weakness of the Republican Party and disarray within the conservative movement. Judd is obviously not just any progressive, she has several advantages and strengths that most ordinary politicians do not enjoy.

Judd's voice, should she win, will be a welcome one in Washington; and not just because she would be replacing McConnell. Most, but not all, senators come to the Senate either by working their way up through their state's local political structures or from after successful careers in the private sector. This leads to a relatively narrow understanding of the world and the country from the upper chamber of our congress. Few senators are elected to that body after working, or even after becoming engaged, with bigger picture or global issues.

Judd has spent the last several years working on issues such as poverty and women's rights that go beyond the political interests of one state. Moreover, she has done this not through limited, and limiting, political structures, but through the position and status she has enjoyed because she is a movie star. Ironically, Judd's success in Hollywood has made it possible for her to think about and wrestle with issues that would be beyond the ken of most local office holders seeking a Senate seat. Should Judd get elected, her victory may inspire more candidates with unconventional experiences and backgrounds to run for the Senate.

Judd's candidacy probably has set some Republican operatives and strategists dreaming of attack ads and other ways to ridicule Judd. It is possible they are right, but it is also possible that something has changed in the last few years and that the image of old out of touch men rhetorically beating up on younger women is no longer one that works for the party. It is similarly possible that Judd, drawing on her background and understanding of Kentucky can break through to the voters of Kentucky who are tiring of McConnell. It is a risky bet for Judd, but one that could change American politics if she wins.