



Republicans have their sights set to take over another Kennedy seat

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Republicans put themselves back on the map in the Northeast by stealing one Kennedy seat. And now, the last vestige of the Kennedy legacy has become a cause célèbre.

Rhode Island state Rep. John Loughlin has found himself the unwitting beneficiary of a concerted effort by 2008 GOP presidential candidates to take that other Kennedy seat — retiring Democratic Rep. Patrick Kennedy's eastern Rhode Island district.

He planned to hold a fundraiser with Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on Wednesday night and has already gained commitments from former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, as well. Romney's campaign team, which guided Scott Brown to victory in the neighboring Massachusetts Senate seat once held by Kennedy's father, also signed up Loughlin as a client soon after.

"It's going to be the next Kennedy seat to become the people's seat," Loughlin told The Hill. "This is the race. This is the one everyone wants to be involved in."

It wasn't always that way. Loughlin for about a year languished as a promising dark-horse Republican candidate with — even he admits — little chance of unseating a Kennedy scion.

But his fortuitous path to an open-seat race has made him the man everyone wants a piece of, even if prognosticators still have a hard time seeing how he wins.

He expects to do an event with Giuliani in the next month or so, and once Romney is off his book tour, the likely 2012 GOP front-runner has promised some help too.

"It's the next national Scott Brown celebrated cause in the Northeast," said one GOP strategist. "It's probably more of an uphill climb than Brown, but it's not capturing lightning in a bottle."

Eric Fehrstrom, who as a principal at the Massachusetts-based Shawmut Group guided Brown to victory, said Brown's win drew attention to his new client, Loughlin.

"The district is close to Massachusetts, and Scott Brown's victory there has forced people to pay a little more attention to the region," said Fehrstrom, who also represents Romney's political action committee.

Loughlin's short, lawyerly appearance doesn't exactly remind one of the statuesque former centerfold senator. But like Brown, he is a little-known state legislator who had been given almost no chance at the start of his race.

Kennedy's seat is the bluer of the two in Rhode Island, and it gave President Barack Obama 65 percent of the vote in 2008. It includes much of Providence, and the city's mayor, David Cicilline, has a good base running on the Democratic side.

Loughlin is also raising money slowly — having pulled in about \$300,000 or \$350,000 in the course of a year — and GOPers hope that pace will increase with the presidential help. He also faces a potential primary with retired Superior Court judge Mark Pfeiffer.

But Loughlin says he's "the Energizer Bunny of campaigning," and he's turning some heads.

"Organization and preparation beats enthusiasm every day of the week," he says, noting then-Sen. Lincoln Chafee's high-profile GOP primary win over Cranston Mayor Steve Laffey in 2006.

Loughlin's organization now includes the Shawmut Group. He had been interviewing the firm, along with another, before Brown's victory. To his detriment, though, he didn't sign them up until after Brown's victory.

"The price went up a little," he said wryly.

But whatever big-name help Loughlin has rustled up, his potential Democratic opponents say could work against him.

After all, Loughlin was campaigning Wednesday with a man who received just 33 percent of the vote in the district in 2008.

"The urgent issues this district faces I don't think are going to be answered by a Republican presidential candidate," Cicilline said.

A spokesman for another candidate, former state Democratic Party Chairman Bill Lynch, said it's a contrast they are happy to draw — specifically when it comes to repealing the healthcare bill, as McCain and Romney have advocated.

"If Mr. Loughlin wants to stand with the repealers and talk about repealing healthcare reform, we're more than happy to have that discussion," said Lynch spokesman Bill Fischer.

Republicans are prepared to mention the Kennedy name on the campaign trail, even though Kennedy routinely won reelection with more than 60 percent of the vote.

Fehrstrom said the Democratic agenda is as unpopular in Rhode Island as it was in Massachusetts and the rest of the country.

"The two Democrats running are running to continue the Patrick Kennedy legacy," Fehrstrom said. "They're going to have to answer for the higher taxes, increased spending and a bigger and bigger government agenda."