

Oh, to be a Senator

I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised that when a U.S. Senator decides to step down there are plenty of people looking to fill the soon-to-be-vacated seat - well before the 'body' is even cold. I wonder why that is? Could it be because of the seat's perceived value or its real value? I don't know for sure, but I suspect that it has something to do with the longer term of service (six years versus the lowly Congressional Representative's two years) and the smaller size of the Senate (100 members versus 435 in the House). If you're a Congressional Representative, you are in constant campaign mode. From the moment you're elected you're busy raising money for your next campaign a year later. In point of fact, you really don't have a heck of a lot of time to legislate because you're constantly pressing somebody's flesh, trying to get into his checkbook for a donation.

Then there's the snob factor. 'Senator' sounds a lot better than 'Representative' ('representative' is something I shout into my phone when I get an automated voice instead of a real person when calling my mobilephone carrier). *Senator* also has that nifty Roman/Greek ring to it, too. Harkens back to those days of white flowing tunics, an abundance of free wine, and plenty of free time to take the baths. Here in New Mexico, we just had one of those announcements from a standing Senator. His name is Tom Udall and he's been doing the Senator thing for nine years now (and yes, he was a Representative before ascending the golden stairway to Senatorhood). The Udall family is the closest thing we Anglos have to a political dynasty here in New Mexico. In fact, the Udalls have been leaving their tracks in four states: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Oregon for about a hundred years. One Udall or another has been supping at Government's table for four generations.

As political dynasties go theirs is rather benign (compared to the Kennedys, for example). There have been Udalls as Mayors (Nick in Phoenix, Arizona), Cabinet Secretaries (Stewart as Sec. of the Interior), Representatives (Morris or 'Mo' from Arizona and Tom from New Mexico) and Senators (Mark from Colorado and Tom from New Mexico). Apart from being Udalls, they are all, of course, Democrats. When Tom Udall announced he was stepping down from his job, I fully expected there would be a deluge of candidates for his seat. So far, only one Dem has thrown his bolo into the ring: Ben Lujan (of the Lujan political dynasty in New Mexico). Ben L.'s daddy was Speaker of the New Mexico House of Representatives for 37 years - yes, I said 37 years.

Ben L. has been in Congress for nine years and easily won re-election to his seat in 2018. It's not his fault, it's what political dynasty members do - they win election after election because no one dares challenge them. That's why there is no real challenger to Lujan for Udall's seat...yet. No one of the New Mexico Democratic Party faithful wants to upset the political apple cart and 'rob' the heir apparent from his claim to the title that all believe should be his. The climb to the mountaintop should not be impeded for a Lujan just as it wasn't for a Udall. The Democratic 'ladder' in New Mexico is more like a stepstool, and it is reserved for those who are already standing on it, ergo Lujan (this time). Even with a strong Republican opponent, he is a shoe-in. Why? Because New Mexico doesn't elect candidates; it anoints them on the basis of identity politics. And it rewards those who stay in their ideological 'lanes.' Lujan has played his political cards well. He has sponsored politically expedient legislation and has carved out an powerful niche for himself as the Hispanic consigliere to the Speaker.

What would he gain from being Senator? Answer: a higher stepstool from which he could reach for the Oval Office (every Senator really wants to be President) and freedom from the hassle of perennial fundraising, not to mention a smaller playground, less competition AND that grand title, 'Senator.' The question then becomes, "Who will succeed him? Not to worry, there are plenty of Democrats in CD3 who would be more than satisfied to be called, *Congressman* or *Congresswoman* and take their place as 'Senators-in-waiting' even if they are the first in their own political dynasty.

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