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West Virginia's Power Players

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Is the Mountain State's newest senator the most powerful politician in the state?

By Walt Williams

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A few months ago, many political pundits expressed disbelief when Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who was then campaigning for office, shot a bullet through the cap-and-trade bill that was one of President Barack Obama's signature pieces of legislation.

The commercial may have angered Democrats' allies on the left, but for Manchin it was another example of perhaps his greatest political skill: winning supporters among groups who otherwise would have little to do with his party.

"He is pretty charismatic," former state Democratic Party Chairman Mike Callaghan said, noting Manchin's ability to win over enemies. "He has got a great ability to do that."

The State Journal recently asked more than 50 business leaders, politicians, community leaders, journalists and citizens to name who they thought were the 10 most influential living political players in the state today.

The newspaper received a lot of names, but when the final results were tallied, Manchin easily topped the list.

Why Manchin? It is hard to think of a single personality who has dominated state politics so completely since being elected governor in 2004. Manchin previously served as secretary of state and in the Legislature, having lost his first bid for governor in the 1996 Democratic primary.

"He took a big hit in '96," Callaghan said. "Instead of laying down, he kept plugging away and working hard."

Manchin grew up in Farmington in a family of politicians. His father, uncle and grandfather all served in either local or state office. Manchin himself first moved in a different direction, receiving a football scholarship at West Virginia University until a knee injury ended his athletic ambitions.

When Manchin took the oath as governor in 2005, he inherited a state-run workers compensation system billions of dollars in debt. His administration immediately began work to privatize the system, eventually leading to the creation of BrickStreet Insurance and the opening up of the state's workers compensation insurance market.

The former governor also ordered the state to allocate its share of a multi-billion dollar tobacco settlement to paying down the debt, much to the consternation of health advocates who said it should have been used to fight tobacco addiction.

In addition, Manchin convinced state lawmakers to begin lowering what he saw as harmful and uncompetitive taxes, such as the sales taxes on food and the business franchise tax.

"A competitive, balanced and equitable tax structure is a significant part of economic success," he told The State Journal in a 2007 interview. "We therefore do need to continue to modernize our system of taxation. There has been and remains in our tax structure certain aspects that do inhibit job creation and capital formation."

Manchin had long been rumored as a possible successor to Sen. Robert C. Byrd. When Byrd died in 2010, Manchin waited until state lawmakers had clarified there would be a special election for the seat before jumping into the race.

The race was supposed to be an easy win for Manchin, but Republican businessman John Raese successfully tapped into many West Virginians' distrust for Obama and tied it to Manchin, narrowing the former governor's lead in the polls.

Manchin fought back by once again courting all sides. He picked up endorsements from unions and chambers of commerce alike. He touted support from traditionally Republican-leaning groups such as the National Rifle Association. Even the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, named him one of the most fiscally responsible governors in the nation -- the only Democrat to make the list.

Manchin will serve in office until the end of 2012, when Byrd's term was due to expire. In an interview in November, he acknowledged it would take time to adjust to life in Washington, D.C. -- especially when the Capitol press corps is keeping constant watch.

"They take your picture as you step out of the bathroom and want to ask you questions as you're drying your hands," he said.

No. 2 — Shelley Moore Capito

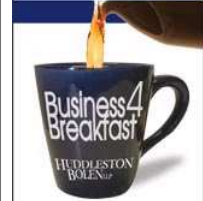
Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., has beaten the odds.

She is a Republican who has held federal office for more than a decade in a state where having "DEM" after your

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name on the ballot is often enough to win an election. And given women have had a tougher time getting elected to top offices in West Virginia than in other states, Capito's run is even more impressive.

West Virginia Wesleyan University political science professor Robert Rupp said Capito's No. 2 spot on the list signified two things.

"One, her popularity in the state," he said. "Two, the increasing conservative tendency of the state."

Capito is the daughter of former Gov. Arch Moore, also a Republican. She followed her father's footsteps into public service, first serving in the state Legislature before being elected to the state's 2nd Congressional District in 2000.

Capito is a conservative with a centrist streak, having, for example, voted in favor of expanding medical research to embryonic stem cells despite her party's opposition to abortion. Despite such votes, she has still managed to win support from West Virginians for Life.

Most recently, Capito has been a vocal critic of many of Obama's environmental and energy policy initiatives, such as efforts to reign in mountaintop mining. The congresswoman had said such policies would harm West Virginia's economy and the nation's energy independence.

No. 3 — Earl Ray Tomblin

In Logan County, he is simply referred to as "Earl Ray."

Acting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin may not be a person who many West Virginians knew much about until recently, but for those who follow state politics, he has been a fixture for more than three decades.

"The political insiders and the people who work there on a daily basis have great respect for Earl Ray," Callaghan said.

Born and raised in Logan County, Tomblin is a former schoolteacher and self-employed businessman. He was first elected to the Legislature in 1974, winning a seat in the state House of Delegates at age 22.

Tomblin has been in the Legislature ever since, switching over to the Senate in 1980. He has served as Senate president since 1995, making him the longest-serving president.

In his role as Senate president, Tomblin has been something of a behind-the-scenes conductor, rarely holding press conferences or doing anything that would elevate his public image. That, of course, changed last year when Manchin resigned to become a U.S. senator, requiring Tomblin to take his place as acting governor.

Tomblin has since said he intends to carry on the fiscal policies that have allowed West Virginia to be one of the few states with a budget surplus. But how long he will remain in office is still in question. The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals is considering two lawsuits arguing for a special election for the seat before the 2012 general elections.

No. 4 — Jay Rockefeller

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., came to the state as a VISTA volunteer in 1964, where one of his first brushes with politics was convincing the Kanawha County Board of Education to extend its school bus routes to Emmons.

It took three tries, but in the end, board members consented to provide a bus.

"It was exhilarating," Rockefeller recalled in a 2009 column for The State Journal about this time in VISTA. "I was reborn -- like I had finally found my soul, like I found what I was meant to do. I had no political bone in my body. My parents were apathetic to the political process, but after seeing I could make positive change I knew politics was the direction I needed to take."

Two years after moving to West Virginia, Rockefeller was elected to the state House of Delegates.

That was the beginning of one of the longest careers in state politics. Rockefeller would go on to become secretary of state, then governor and then U.S. senator -- a seat he has occupied continuously since 1984.

Rockefeller currently serves as chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, which makes him a key player in policy debates over such things as Internet regulation, highway safety and research funding.

Most recently, Rockefeller was a major supporter of the federal health care reform bill that passed Congress in 2010, although he was unsuccessful in his push to include a government-run insurance program to compete with private insurers.

No. 5 — Rick Thompson

State House Speaker Rick Thompson, D-Wayne, isn't a newcomer to politics, but it is only recently that his political career has truly taken off.

Thompson was first elected to the state House of Delegates in 1980, when he served just one term. He came back in 2000 and has served continuously since then, winning the speaker's seat thanks to support from pro-union delegates.

It was a major change for a delegate who had been a relatively quiet member of the House, as he acknowledged in a 2007 interview.

"Well, you know I speak when I need to," he said. "I'll need to a lot more as the speaker. But in the preparation, you just have a good working knowledge of the rules. Because the most important thing out there is that the rules be complied with and to maintain the House in an orderly fashion, to manage the business because we have a lot of business to do and try to use the time wisely on the floor so we'll have plenty of time for committee."

The House under Thompson's leadership has shown something of an independent streak from the governor's office, at least compared to the state Senate.

He was in the House where many of Manchin's policies as governor received the greatest scrutiny and sometimes

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died. House members helped derail many of Manchin's proposed changes in the public school system during a special session in 2010. They also questioned several of his priorities during the 2009 session, leading to a tense, but brief, legislative standoff.

Thompson, in an interview afterward, said such give and take was just part of the legislative process.

"The House and the Senate and the governor each have different ideas," he said.

No. 6 — Nick Rahall

U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., has been a fixture in state and federal politics for more than three decades.

First elected to the House of Representatives in 1976, Rahall had previously served as a staffer for Byrd. He currently represents the 3rd Congressional District, which includes many of the southern coal mines that have been the focus of controversy in recent years.

The district includes many mountaintop mining operations that Rahall has defended against attempts at increased federal regulation.

The move may make him unpopular with environmentalists but he learned the backlash from the mining community could be more severe: His suggestion in 2009 that federal regulators were only doing their jobs by delaying mining permits led to protesting miners waving signs accusing him of being "anti-coal" and at least one mining company official proposing that coal companies campaign against his re-election.

Whatever ill-will his comments may have generated appeared to dissipate after the Upper Big Branch Mine tragedy. Rahall was on-site for most of the rescue operation, meeting with families and offering what assistance he could.

"My heart goes out to the loved ones of those who lost their lives," he said at the time. "They can be certain that there will be an investigation into this mine and the cause of this disaster."

Rahall now finds himself in a different position than just a few months ago, although one he has been in before. With Republicans controlling the House, he is now in the minority party and has lost his chairmanship of the House Committee on Natural Resources as a result.

No. 7 — David McKinley

U.S. Rep. David McKinley, R-W.Va., pulled off what some would have said, while not impossible, was highly unlikely: win a seat held by Democrats for more than 40 years.

McKinley won the race for the 1st Congressional District during 2010 elections, beating state Sen. Mike Oliverio in a nail-biter of a contest. As a result, Republicans control a majority of the state's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time since 1969.

"People had an opportunity to express the opinion that they didn't want more of the same, they didn't want leaders in Washington ignoring jobs and the economy, pushing a health care plan no one wants, a stimulus plan that failed and a war on coal," McKinley told supporters in Wheeling after the last vote counts had come in. "I think conservative politics worked."

McKinley prides himself as a seventh-generation West Virginian who has been active in both the community and the state. He served in the state House of Delegates from 1981 to 1994 and was elected chairman of the West Virginia Republican Party Executive Committee in 1990.

His race for the 1st District wasn't his first flirt with higher office. He ran for governor in 1996 but was defeated in the Republican primary by former Gov. Cecil Underwood.

McKinley's win last year didn't happen in a vacuum. Oliverio had knocked off former Rep. Alan Mollohan in a race that alienated Oliverio to many traditional Democratic allies, such as labor unions.

Still, McKinley's election to a traditional Democratic seat is getting him attention. Most recently, the political newspaper Politico named him one of 10 freshmen GOP members to watch on energy issues.

No. 8 — Robin Davis

Justice Robin Davis has been laying down the law more than 14 years.

A native of Boone County, Davis was elected to the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals in 1996. Since then she has served as chief justice five times and is currently the most senior member of the court.

According to her official biography, Davis practiced law in West Virginia from 1982 until her election to the court in 1996. She was the first West Virginia attorney to be named to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers and also served on the West Virginia Board of Law Examiners.

Besides presiding over numerous cases during her time on the court, she also oversaw the court's adoption of new appellate rules and new juvenile procedure rules during her term as chief justice in 2010.

During an unveiling of the new appellate rules in 2010, Davis said the goal was to make the court more transparent.

"The proposed rules indicate the court's acknowledgment that we understand the public has a right to know why we decide to hear arguments in one case and not another," Davis said.

As far as her future, Davis recently recused herself from a lawsuit to determine whether a special election should be held for governor, saying she plans to run for office in 2012 but not saying which office she is running for.

No. 9 — Natalie Tennant

Natalie Tennant started out as West Virginia University's first female Mountaineer and ended up as secretary of state.

Now she is one of the most visible politicians in West Virginia, holding an office that is often seen as a stepping

stone to the governor's mansion.

Tennant's current role as secretary of state is the first time she has held public office. But she had been a public figure for a long time before that, first as WVU's mascot and later as a television reporter and anchor.

Tennant previously ran for the office in 2004 and lost.

"I guess the determination and don't-quit attitude can get it done," she said shortly after learning about her victory in 2008. "I still feel like I have to wake up tomorrow and campaign."

As secretary of state, Tennant has overseen a number of changes in elections and business filings, as well as taken full advantage of modern technology. Her office broadcast live on Internet on Election Day and regularly posts videos and other information on its website.

Tennant has largely avoided controversy, although last year she found herself in a dispute with state Attorney General Darrell McGraw about whether a special election was needed before 2012 to replace Byrd. The Legislature ultimately passed a bill allowing for a special election.

No. 10 — Nick Casey

Nick Casey may seem an unusual choice in that, unlike the other people on the list, he has never held public office.

But the lobbyist and former state Democratic Party chairman is perhaps one of the most important behind-the-scenes players in state politics.

Casey served as Manchin's campaign treasurer in 2004, and two years later he helped the party weather a \$2 million campaign by former Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship to unseat Democratic incumbents in the state Legislature.

"There is a wave coming into West Virginia," he told a crowd of supporters during 2006 elections. "It's a Democratic tsunami coming into West Virginia."

Casey has since stepped down as chairman and at one point had been nominated by Byrd for a federal judgeship. However, he declined the offer so he could instead become a managing partner at Lewis Glasser Casey & Rollins.

"I appreciated the fact that Sen. Byrd recommended me to the President for a federal judgeship, but given the climate in D.C. and the political overlay I am going to be managing partner and keep moving forward with my law practice and legislative work," he said.

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