



Outside candidate for Supreme Court buoyed by McConnell's backing

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July 8, 2018

Amul Thapar is emerging as the candidate to watch as President Trump mulls his next Supreme Court pick.

While he isn't considered a top-tier contender to replace Justice Anthony Kennedy, the circuit court judge has a powerful ally in his corner: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.).

Combined with his age, 49, and ability to let Trump make history by appointing the first Asian-American to the Supreme Court, Thapar is being termed the "sleeper" candidate for the Supreme Court seat. The White House is reportedly focused more on federal appeals judges Brett Kavanaugh, Amy Coney Barrett and Raymond Kethledge.

“Judge Thapar is very, very sharp,” McConnell said during a speech in Kentucky last week. “It would be wonderful to have someone from our state, but beyond where he’s from, he’s just a unique talent.”

Thapar, whose parents immigrated from India, has served as an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, D.C., and southern Ohio before becoming the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky in 2006.

He started his judicial career when he was confirmed unanimously by the Senate in 2007 to be a judge for the U.S. district court for the Eastern District of Kentucky.

Thapar, then a district judge, was one of four nominees interviewed by Trump in 2017 for the late Justice Antonin Scalia’s seat that was ultimately filled by Neil Gorsuch.

Thapar was the only one who did not have experience as a circuit judge. His nomination, roughly three months later, to serve on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit sparked immediate speculation that he was being groomed for an eventual Supreme Court vacancy.

McConnell acknowledged that he's unsure if Thapar will ultimately be Trump's pick, noting there is a lot of "competition." But the GOP leader — who has supported Thapar for more than a decade — publicly floated Thapar to be considered for Kennedy's vacancy and said he encouraged Trump to consider him for the seat.

Conservatives, meanwhile, are touting Thapar for the Supreme Court vacancy, arguing he is an originalist in line with Gorsuch and Scalia.

"Thapar is a history-making choice for a president who loves to make history," Scott Jennings, a GOP strategist and former George W. Bush aide, wrote in a Real Clear Politics op-ed making the case for Thapar. "For conservatives, Thapar is a dream choice."

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said that if Trump nominates Thapar, "the nation will get a young, charismatic, personable, textualist and originalist who could serve on the court for three decades or more."

But Thapar lacks some of the attributes Trump has publicly said he wants in a nominee, including an Ivy League background. Thapar attended law school at the University of California at Berkeley.

And if the Trump administration is looking for a nomination that could be bipartisan, Thapar would likely fall short of that mark.

He was confirmed for his current post in a 52-44 vote last year with no Democratic support.

Liberal groups are already lining up against Thapar, and in doing so they're signaling what lines of attack they would take if he is nominated.

A group called Demand Justice is hitting Thapar over his opinions on campaign finance, saying he and Trump would "sell our government to the highest bidder." Meanwhile, NARAL Pro-Choice America has said Thapar "is active in the conservative, anti-choice Federalist Society."