

## POLITICAL HAY

# Bayh Bayh Evan?

By RiShawn Biddle on 12.17.09 @ 6:08AM

Birch Evans (Evan) Bayh III is the last person factoring into the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee's efforts to retain control of the upper house. Amid abysmal poll numbers for Majority Leader Harry Reid, Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter and Connecticut's Christopher Dodd, the junior senator from Indiana's 63 percent favorable rating in the state Democratic Party's internal poll makes a third term a likely reality.

The former Indiana governor's \$12 million war chest -- and a declaration by the Republican Senate campaign czar John Cornyn that the seat was not a "priority" -- seemingly clears Bayh of any meaningful GOP competition. Despite being the son of a legendarily colorful liberal senator -- and to the disdain of progressives everywhere -- Bayh *fills* has cultivated an image of bland-but-sensible moderate by serving as chairman of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, voting for the War in Iraq, and unsuccessfully proposing such family-friendly measures as an initiative to promote fatherhood.

"What makes America special (is that) the Oath of Allegiance to our country is really the Oath of Allegiance to an idea, to a dream, to a promise," declared Bayh three years ago to graduates of DePauw University in one of his usual snore-speeches.

But these days, Bayh can no longer say that winning re-election is an absolutely sure thing. In the minds of many Hoosiers, Bayh's support for the proposed healthcare reform plan is just the latest reminder that his fiscal and social conservatism is more image than reality. On the ground, the state Democratic machine he built into a powerhouse is in tatters. Anger and fatigue among Indiana voters, who, like their fellow voters, want an end to the current recession may subject Bayh to the particular consequences of an anti-incumbency mood. Meanwhile Bayh may face a formidable Republican in John Hostettler, who successfully used grassroots campaigning to hold a congressional seat until being tossed out four years ago during the Democratic sweep.

Although Bayh is likely to keep office, his possible struggles offer a lesson for Republicans *and* Democrats who play all sides of the fence way too often.

AS SON OF BIRCH BAYH, who rose meteorically from serving in the Indiana House of Representatives (where he was speaker) to defeating two-term Republican incumbent

Homer Caphart for the U.S. Senate in 1962 at age 34, Evan was groomed for the political limelight. He proceeded on his own path to political stardom, winning two successive terms as Indiana governor before recapturing his father's seat in 1998 after 18 years in Republican hands.

Ever mindful of how his father's perceived liberalism contributed to his defeat at the hands of future Vice President Dan Quayle in 1980, Bayh *files* proceeded on a course of fiscal conservatism and socially-moderate positions that would even win him praise from then-Cato Institute scholar Stephen Moore for being a "genuinely fiscally conservative Democrat." His penchant for cutting taxes and caution on social issues also helped the state's Democratic Party, which managed to win control of the state's lower house, hold nearly all statewide offices and, by 1999, end Indianapolis's status of being one of the few big cities in Republican hands.

Bayh continued to maintain his conservative image, even as he tended to vote alongside his party more than 72 percent of the time. For this, he has reaped such benefits as being a perennial vice presidential aspirant; he was considered a possible contender for the Democratic presidential nomination three years ago, before Barack Obama's successful campaign. His well-practiced calls for "practical solutions," along with his formation of a "moderate Democrat working group," also gives the party a counterweight to more-demonstrably left-leaning (and often, more-polarizing) colleagues.

This, in turn, makes Bayh a target of ridicule among the Democratic Party's left-leaning activist wing, which blames him for wishy-washiness and for watering down "cap-and-trade" and other legislation it holds dear. Declared notoriously snide blogger Matthew Yglesias earlier this year after Bayh raised objections to one of President Obama's rounds of proposed tax increases: "If you're dramatically richer than most Indianans and sociopathically unconcerned with the well-being of your fellow citizens, then Evan Bayh is fighting for you."

BUT BAYH-BASHING IS NO longer just the favored sport of the progressive movement. Growing choruses of more-conservative Hoosiers voters are also none too pleased with him. Particularly irksome is Bayh's support for the healthcare reform plan, which has proven to be more of an arrangement among the Obama administration, health insurance firms, and the pharmaceutical industry to expand federal power and increase subsidies to the industry at taxpayer expense. The senator's heavy dependence on fundraising (and family income) from pharmaceutical giants such as Eli Lilly -- which calls Indianapolis its hometown -- has cast his support in a harsher light.

Other Hoosiers are waking up to Bayh's less-than-conservative voting record -- which includes a 100 percent rating from NARAL Pro-Choice America -- and his tendency for casting fingers to the air. As noted by the *American Prospect's* Ezra Klein, Bayh can go from a "flash of liberalism" to conservatism in just one year. Obama's current unpopularity, both nationally and in Indiana, brings another layer of inconvenience for Bayh's campaign team.

Bayh can't count on state Democratic leaders to sustain his campaign. Since 2004, the

party has lost two consecutive gubernatorial races to Republicans; Bayh's protégé, Bart Peterson, was ousted as Indianapolis mayor two years ago, leaving control of city government back in (admittedly incompetent) Republican hands. Bayh and other Democrat leaders in the state couldn't even get primary voters to back their favored candidate for the gubernatorial nomination during last year's primary; Hoosier Democrats also rejected Bayh's choice for the presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, and backed Obama instead.

Given the popularity of the state's current governor, Mitch Daniels, who lives up to his reputation for taking sharp, polarizing stances on key issues, Bayh's cautious approach could actually backfire on him this time around. Instead, it may favor Hostettler, who demonstrated a willingness to part with Republican leaders and former president George W. Bush on such matters as the Iraq War. Given Bayh's past support for the nation's costliest misadventure, Hostettler may even succeed in convincing a few Hoosier Democrats to stay home.

Bayh may end up wishing he were ideologically consistent rather than a milquetoast actor.

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