

The Family Business

How Political Dynasties Function in the United States Senate

By Katherine Esten

Political families, or political dynasties, have existed in the United States Senate throughout American history. Despite changes in the electoral process through the passage of the 17th Amendment, political dynasties have remained prominent in American politics. The strength of political dynasties lies in the narrative the family presents. In early senatorial history, the narrative was framed by existing intra-state influence and patterns of class. However, after the introduction of popular election, the success of dynastic candidates ultimately depends on their ability to shape the narrative their family presents. Incorporating critical accounts of political dynasties both before and after the 17th Amendment, this paper argues that the creation and destruction of political dynasties in the modern era lies entirely in the hands of the voters and the narrative they are presented.

The office of United States Senator should be merited, and not inherited,” Edward J. McCormack argued in the Democratic Primary Debate in the 1962 Massachusetts US Senate Special Election. Claiming that his opponent’s candidacy would be considered “a joke” if it weren’t for his last name, McCormack continued, “But nobody’s laughing, because his name is not Edward Moore. It’s Edward Moore Kennedy.”¹

Despite McCormack’s accusations of entitlement against him, Edward Moore Kennedy went on to win the Democratic primary in a landslide. Later, he would triumph in the general election, and serve forty-seven years in the United States Senate. While Kennedy found his last name being credited for his victory, he wasn’t alone in facing allegations of dynastic politics. Federal legislature has seen over 700 families in which two or more members have served since 1774. This accounts for 1,700 of the 10,000 men and women elected.² While dynastic politics may hint at aristocratic tradition within American democracy, changes in political procedure reflect the true power behind dynastic families- not corruptive influence, but temporary control of the narrative.

For this essay, a “political dynasty” is defined as a system in which multiple members of the same family serve in the same level of government. A political dynasty does not have to be simultaneous service or service from the same region, and the members can be related either by blood or marriage. Further, this analysis is limited to the upper branch of the United States Senate, excluding the United States House of Representatives. Due to their longer terms (six years versus two years) and their more concentrated individual role in the government, Senators are better able to establish the power and influence necessary to support generations of a political dynasty.³ This trend is supported by research in the field of dynastic politics, with 13.5 percent of senators having come from dynastic families, in comparison to only 7.7 percent of representatives.⁴

Within the Senate, the analysis of dynastic politics can largely be divided into two eras: before and after the 17th Amendment. Prior to the passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913, Senators were appointed by the legislature of a given state; this was changed to permit the popular election of senators by the citizens of a respective state. The appointment by state legislatures, as explained by the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, gave state governments “such an agent in the formation of the federal government” that it would “form a convenient link between the two systems.”⁵ In practice, the appointment by state legislatures was a slow-moving process taking place largely within the caucuses of the political parties. With few exceptions, senators were existing members of the state legislature, or prominent citizens of the state.⁶ In order to be appointed in the pre-17th Amendment era, control of the narrative was holding intra-state influence among political elites, and a level of class often originating from birth.

The patterns of class and intra-state influences were major elements of pre-1913 political dynastic families, as represented by the Bayard political family of Delaware. Five members of the Bayard family served as U.S. Senators from Delaware, during a span from 1789 until 1929. Started by James A. Bayard, the Bayard

1 Neil Swidey, “Chapter 2: The Youngest Brother: Turbulence and Tragedies Eclipse Early Triumphs,” *Boston Globe*, (February 2009).

2 Stephen Hess, “Political Dynasties: An American Tradition,” *Brookings*, July 28, 2016.

3 Staff, “Dynasties,” *The Economist*. April 18, 2015.

4 Christopher Ingraham, “Family dynasties: How power begets power in Congress,” *The Washington Post*. April 29, 2014.

5 “The Federalist No. 62.” *The Federalist* #62.

6 Wendy Schiller and Charles Stewart III, *Electing the Senate: Indirect Democracy Before the Seventeenth Amendment*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

family was prominent in statewide Delaware politics throughout the 19th century.⁷ By the time Thomas F. Bayard was born in 1828, into what became the fourth generation, the family was very wealthy.⁸ Thomas enjoyed a very privileged upbringing, receiving education at private academies in Wilmington and New York City as a child. Before he was twenty, his father helped him secure a job in a Philadelphia banking firm. A few years later, Thomas returned to Delaware to study as a lawyer. In 1851, the same year his father became a senator, Thomas was admitted to the bar. Thomas quickly rose in Delaware legal society. After two years practicing law, Thomas was appointed as the U.S. Attorney General in Delaware by newly elected Democratic president, Franklin Pierce. Establishing his own law firm in Philadelphia, Thomas temporarily left the federal government, until 1858. Thomas attended several Democratic conventions with his father and became known as a staunch opponent of Republican President, Abraham Lincoln. Thomas was appointed to his father's, James A. Bayard Jr.'s, seat in 1869 to little opposition. Thomas quickly rose as a prominent Democratic legislator in the post-Civil War government, heading the anti-Reconstruction movement. Arguably the most prominent member of the Bayard political dynasty, Thomas made multiple bids for the presidency, established himself within the Democratic leadership, and served as the Secretary of State under President Garfield.⁹ Thomas' rise and success inevitably built off the early advantages of political grooming within his family.

The Frelinghuysen family of New Jersey was another example of a political dynasty in the 19th century, sending four members to the U.S. Senate. Frederick Theodore Frelinghuysen was raised by his uncle, Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen, who in turn had been raised by his own father and Frederick T.'s namesake, Frederick Frelinghuysen. Upon reaching adulthood, Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen aided his nephew in acquiring connections in the state's commerce community, and eventually, establish a career in law.¹⁰ Frederick T. Frelinghuysen became a prominent citizen within New Jersey, and was appointed to his first political office in 1871, as a U.S. Senator and served until 1881, when he was appointed Secretary of State under President Chester Alan Arthur.¹¹ Frederick T. Frelinghuysen's great-grandson, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., later served as a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, representing a convergence of two powerful political families, the Cabot Lodges and the Frelinghuysens.¹²

The rise of Thomas Bayard shared many similarities with the rise of Frederick T. Frelinghuysen, especially in the established patterns of class and intra-state influence. In fact, their relative prominence prior to gaining office is directly drawn from the early advantages their upper-class birth provided. Raised within social circles well-acquainted with political leaders, children of political dynasties were more likely to have access to careers in commerce or law. These careers, which Thomas and Frederick both participated in, were common launchpads to political careers. Dynastic politicians would also provide for the continuance of their

⁷ Joseph Gaston Baillie Bulloch, *A History and Genealogy of the Families of Bayard, Houstoun of Georgia: and the Descent of the Bolton Family from Assheton, Byon and Hulton of Hulton Park* (Salem: Higginson Book Company, 1997).

⁸ Charles Callan Tansill, *The Congressional Career of Thomas F. Bayard*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1946).

⁹ Tansill, *The Congressional Career of Thomas F. Bayard*.

¹⁰ Staff, "Frederick Frelinghuysen. Ex-President of Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company Dies" *New York Times*. January 2, 1924.

¹¹ Staff, "G.G. Frelinghuysen Dies. Son of Arthur's Secretary Of State Was Lawyer". *New York Times*, April 22, 1936.

¹² Hugh Chisholm, "Frelinghuysen, Frederick Theodore," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911)

family by circumstance. Traveling in the same social circles, politicians were more likely to marry other members of the political upper class.¹³ While it is true that social mobility existed within the United States, senators of the 19th century commonly came from established upper-class origins.¹⁴ Members of the Senate during this time generally did not find themselves in the Senate chamber as a result of legislative prowess or individual qualifications, even if they were held. Instead, class circumstances and intra-state influence were more influential in the families' control and establishment of political dynasties.

But if there are explanations as to why certain families have gravitated towards political life, their continued success after the passage of the 17th Amendment is less clear. In 1913, when the amendment passed, dynastic politics was at an all-time high, with nearly twenty-five percent of Senators coming from dynastic families.¹⁵ The American people saw the Senate as a monument to inefficiency and corruption. Forcing the appointees through party caucuses often created deadlocks in the state legislature, delaying representation in the Senate.¹⁶ By the early twentieth century, Progressive Era populists professed that senatorial elections were "bought and sold" rather than based on competence, though little contemporary evidence supported this claim.¹⁷ Supporters of the 17th Amendment sought to displace what was seen as a "millionaire's club" in the Senate, and remove powerful private interests by shifting to the direct election of senators. Following the Amendment's passage in 1913, there was a noticeable and sudden decrease in the percentage of dynastic politicians. However, this decline stagnated with approximately ten percent of senators consistently having come from dynastic families throughout the modern era of the Senate.¹⁸ This statistic reflects an essential fact of the modern Senate: voters are voluntarily supporting political dynasties. While the 17th Amendment attempted to create a legal barrier to a political class, it indirectly led to the creation of a fluid political class. Within this, candidates from dynastic families are challenged to individualize themselves, but can potentially benefit from the legacy of their predecessors.

For non-dynastic candidates in a political race, name recognition is among the largest challenge. For dynastic candidates, existing name recognition serves as both a benefit and a burden. When Al Gore, Jr. ran for the U.S. Senate in Tennessee in 1984, he was astutely aware of the power of his last name. His father, Al Gore Sr. had served as a Democratic senator from the state from 1953 to 1971, and had remained popular within the state.¹⁹ Early coverage of Al Gore Jr.'s campaign pointed to his growing up in political influence, like visiting his father's Senate office, interacting with visiting dignitaries in the family home, and playing a prominent role on his father's campaigns in 1958 and 1964. When the younger Gore prepared for his campaign announcement, his father was among the first he told. The elder Gore, still a popular figure in the state, immediately offered to campaign on behalf of his son. In response, the younger Gore refused, saying it would take away his legitimacy

13 Hess "Political Dynasties: An American Tradition."

14 "Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States." Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States, Introduction to Sociology.

15 Ingraham, "Family dynasties: How power begets power in Congress."

16 Jay S. Bybee, "Ulysses at the Mast: Democracy, Federalism, and the Sirens' Song of the Seventeenth Amendment." (Northwestern University Law Review, 1997).

17 Bybee, "Ulysses at the Mast: Democracy, Federalism, and the Sirens' Song of the Seventeenth Amendment."

18 Ingraham, "Family dynasties: How power begets power in Congress."

19 Bill Turque, *Inventing Al Gore* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000).

as a candidate. “I must become my own man,” Gore explained, “I must not be your candidate.”²⁰ For Al Gore Jr., the desire to be considered an independent and authentic candidate gained priority over acknowledging any advantage his family may have given him, being raised within politics.

While it is difficult to define the Gore family as a true, multigenerational dynasty, their short dominance in government is reflective of the fluidity of modern politics. Campaigning on behalf of a legacy is rarely successful, as it invites constant comparison and a lack of individual credit for success. A decade later, Lincoln Chafee became a case example of the failure to achieve individualization. In 1999, longtime Rhode Island Senator John Chafee declared he would not be running for reelection for the seat he had held since 1976.²¹ Upon the announcement, his son, Lincoln Chafee, who was then-mayor of Warwick, RI, declared his candidacy for the seat. John Chafee died in late 1999, while the campaign for his replacement was ongoing. Governor Lincoln Almond of Rhode Island appointed the younger Chafee to complete his father’s term, while still campaigning for the seat. The appointment provided “a critical boost” to Lincoln Chafee’s campaign, and Chafee won a full Senate term in 2000.²² However, his years in office brought frequent comparisons to his father. Considered an “affable fellow” that “lacked his father’s gravitas,”²³ contemporaries considered Chafee to operate within the shadow of his father. He never gained political independence while in the Senate and lost his reelection in 2006. The branding integral to the modern political dynasty played a significant role in the campaigns of Gore and Chafee. With their last names already well established in the state, the candidates benefitted from near universal name recognition. However, they faced difficulty in establishing their own platform. Instead, the sons essentially started their political careers off what their fathers had completed. Al Gore Jr. eventually surpassed his father and gained independence, but Lincoln Chafee was never seen as leaving his father’s shadow.

The role of name-branding in American politics was examined in Frank Popper’s 2006 documentary, “Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?” which followed Jeff Smith’s grassroots 2004 congressional campaign in Missouri.²⁴ Running against a member of a prominent political family in the state, Smith said that political dynasties give candidates “near universal name identification,” a “huge rolodex,” and a “huge understanding of how politics works.” He questioned, “Are any of these skills necessary to become a great public servant? No, but if you understand the game, you may end up spending less time banging your head against the wall learning how things work.”²⁵ Smith’s synthesis of the advantages gained by dynastical candidates emphasizes how voters are exposed far more to political families rather than newcomers.

While some 20th-century candidates, like Al Gore Jr., avoided any comparison with his family, a significant deviation from this trend exists. The Kennedy family of Massachusetts instead embraced the strength of a family legacy, an allowance permitted due to prominence. Almost continuously from 1952 to 2009, a Kennedy brother served in the United States Senate. The first Kennedy to serve as senator, John F. Kennedy, ran in 1952 with the aid of his family, encouraging association with his grandfather, John Fitzgerald,

20 “Albert A. Gore, Jr., 45th Vice President (1993-2001).” U.S. Senate: Albert A. Gore, Jr., 45th Vice President (1993-2001).

21 Staff. “Funeral held for Rhode Island Sen. John Chafee”. *CNN*. October 30, 1999.

22 Shailagh Murray, “A Republican on the Edge.” *The Washington Post*. April 14, 2006.

23 Murray, “A Republican on the Edge.”

24 “Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?,” Our Films, PBS.

25 Mahtesian, Charles. “The United States of Dynasty: Boom Times For Political Families.” *NPR*. July 18, 2013.

a popular Boston mayor and congressman, as well as his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, a former ambassador.²⁶ His younger brothers, Robert and Edward, played an active role in his campaign. After John F. Kennedy won the presidency in 1960, the family moved to support his brother Edward M. Kennedy in a run for the vacant Senate seat. While criticized for not holding previous elected office, and running on name alone, Edward took advantage of his family's prominence in the state by tying his campaign to the liberal policies of his brother and the new presidential administration.²⁷ Edward M. Kennedy, one of three brothers to serve in the U.S. Senate, ran his first race with no previous elected experience, and won- a victory that was largely credited to admiration of his older brother, then-President John F. Kennedy, and respect for his family within the state.²⁸ During the campaign, Edward shied away from complete dependence on his name recognition, but did not hold back from allowing his mothers and sisters campaigning for him as they had done for John²⁹

After John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Robert Kennedy joined Edward in the Senate as a Senator from New York, in 1964, despite having little previous association with the state. His opponent, incumbent Republican Senator Kenneth Keating, labeled Kennedy a carpetbagger, and accused him of taking advantage of his national profile from his brother's administration. Robert Kennedy asserted, "I like to be involved in politics. I like to be involved in government. I've been in politics all my life. I would like to remain in government. I don't think that's so sinister."³⁰

In the wake of their brother's death, Robert and Edward took advantage of their roles in the Senate to John F. Kennedy's unfinished legislation. In Edward M. Kennedy's maiden speech on the Senate floor, he invoked his brother's support of the concerned Civil Rights bill, saying that "No memorial, oration, or eulogy could more eloquently honor" his brother than the passage of the bill "for which he fought so long."³¹ Similarly, Robert Kennedy spoke at the 1964 Democratic National Convention to urge support for progressive measures in memory of his brother. In what became known as his "Stars" speech, Robert emphasized how important it had been to his brother "that there were thousands of people" who were "dedicated to certain principles and to certain ideals."³² Robert later clarified the statement to include issues such as Social Security, minimum wage, civil rights, and other progressive legislation. Noting that the country cannot just look back to the President they have lost, Robert pushed the Democratic Party to continue these reforms with the same vigor under President Johnson.³³

Years later, Robert Kennedy also invoked his brother's legacy to empathize with citizens after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., on April 4, 1968. Speaking to angry citizens "filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act," Robert Kennedy admitted having similar feelings when he "had a member of his family killed." Speaking from his own experience, Robert encouraged the country to "go beyond

26 "Rose Kennedy speaks at a Tea, 1952," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

27 Ed Hornick, "Ted Kennedy, 'Lion of the Senate,' helped shape American politics." *CNN*. August 27, 2009.

28 Hornick, "Ted Kennedy, 'Lion of the Senate.'"

29 Politics, and MTP Film Festival with AFI. "MTP at 70: Before the Senate, JFK Makes His Debut." *NBCNews.com*.

November 8, 2017.

30 "Robert F. Kennedy." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed January 18, 2018.

31 Team, CDM Web Strategy. "First Floor Speech - tedkennedy." In *His Own Words* | Edward M. Kennedy. July 24, 2017.

32 "Robert F. Kennedy Speeches." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Accessed January 18, 2018.

33 "Robert F. Kennedy Speeches."

these rather difficult times,” and work in King’s memory.³⁴ Robert and Edward both recognized the inherent power of their brother’s and their own name during emotional, political, turbulent times.

Robert Kennedy, while campaigning for the presidency in 1968, was tragically assassinated just as his brother had been. Robert Kennedy’s supporters, searching for a standard bearer with similar ideals, started a “Draft Ted” movement, urging Edward to take the nomination in memory of his brother.³⁵ Eventual nominee Hubert Humphrey even considered adding Edward to the ticket as the vice-presidential candidate, to draw out supporters of John and Robert.³⁶ Instead, Edward insisted that he would remain in the Senate where he felt he could best serve the legacy of his family.³⁷

Edward was seen as “The Last Link to Camelot,” a reference to the presidency of his brother, John F. Kennedy. With steadfast dedication to the great idealism the brothers had been known for, and persistence through the great tragedies of their assassinations, Edward and the Kennedy family became a representation of the sacrifice that families make for public service.³⁸ By serving longer than either of his brothers, Edward’s public service record was incomparable to his brothers in terms of policy. Instead, Edward embraced his role in preserving the legacy of his family. At the 2000 Democratic National Primary, Edward Kennedy spoke on behalf of his family while endorsing the nominee, Al Gore Jr. Reminiscing upon John F. Kennedy’s presidency, Edward declared that John would be proud of “Al Gore and the party” in facing a “new frontier.”³⁹ Edward even called to mind his work with the elder Al Gore on Medicare, an initiative started by John F. Kennedy that was embraced by the younger Al Gore.⁴⁰ Through characterizing his support in language associated with his brother, Edward embraced the idea of a political dynasty. In his view, he was not amassing power, but fulfilling an unfinished promise.

The Kennedy family capitalized on the popularity of their members to gain control of the narrative. To a lesser degree, the Gore and Chafee families sought a similar control over voters’ perception of them. The importance of narrative control, while existing prior to the 17th Amendment, gains dominance in the modern era. Acknowledging they are part of dynasties, candidates must portray themselves in a manner that might appeal directly to candidates. Voters may afford them the opportunity to govern, but only if this narrative is successful. While Kennedy gained recognition as a “legacy holder,” and Gore received credit as an “independent candidate,” Chafee suffered endless comparison and was never judged on his own merits.

With the ability to vote for senators, the people of the United States have allowed a political class to be created, but it is a temporary control. The power of dynastic families is not guaranteed. If a political family loses control of their narrative through questionable actions, the voters will gain retribution through populism. Addressing the question of how voters react to political dynasties, Charles Mahtesian of NPR noted that when the Governor of Alaska, Frank Murkowski, appointed his daughter, Lisa, to the United States Senate, he “sparked a backlash” that led to his own defeat in his primary for reelection in 2006.⁴¹ This instance represents

34 “Robert Kennedy: Delivering News of King’s Death.” *NPR*. April 04, 2008.

35 David Greenberg, “A lesson for Obama from 1968.” *Slate Magazine*, June 04, 2008.

36 Staff. “Ted Kennedy Vice President Run 1968.” *Newsweek*. March 13, 2010.

37 Hornick, “Ted Kennedy, ‘Lion of the Senate’”

38 Hornick, “Ted Kennedy, ‘Lion of the Senate’”

39 Edward Kennedy “Speech to the Democratic Convention.” *The New York Times*. August 14, 2000.

40 Kennedy, “Speech to the Democratic Convention.”

41 Mahtesian, “The United States Of Dynasty: Boom Times For Political Families.”

the fragile control political dynasties have in the modern era, ruling with permission of the people.

Prior to the 17th Amendment, control of the narrative only meant that power was derived from intra-state control and existing influence. In the modern era, dynastic candidates are constantly forced to maintain control of this narrative, leading to an incredibly fluid political class. While in one generation, a political dynasty might hold incredible amounts of power, their control will inevitably decline in the long-run, emphasizing the inherent equality in American politics. How long a dynastic family lasts is dependent on their control of the narrative, even more so due to the 17th Amendment. The creation and destruction of political dynasties is entirely in the hands of the voters, and the narrative they are presented.

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South African divestment march, UMass Amherst, ca. 1987. Activism of the 1980s Collection (PH 012). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries