New York governor taps right-wing Democrat to fill Clinton’s Senate seat

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New York Governor David Paterson Friday announced his choice of Representative Kirsten Gillibrand to fill the vacant US Senate seat of newly confirmed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The decision provoked protests from leading state Democrats passed over for the job as well as from advocacy groups opposed to the appointee's right-wing political views.

The selection came after Caroline Kennedy, the political neophyte daughter of assassinated President John F. Kennedy, announced an end to her quest for the appointment.

Kennedy issued a brief statement Thursday declaring that she was taking her name out of consideration for "personal reasons."

Paterson aides subsequently told the media that she had confronted "tax problems and a nanny issue," while other unnamed sources have claimed that her bid for the Senate seat had threatened to undermine her marriage.

A Kennedy spokesman condemned these leaks as "mudslinging." But they clearly raised the question of whether she had voluntarily withdrawn her candidacy or whether she was pushed. Initially treated by the media as the inevitable replacement for Clinton by virtue of her family name, deep pockets and close ties to Barack Obama, she had come under mounting criticism for her lack of experience or even basic familiarity with major political issues.

Also underlying the controversy over Kennedy's attempt to win the Senate appointment were tensions between Governor Paterson and Kennedy's principal political backer, New York City's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg. Relations between Albany and City Hall have grown increasingly contentious as the state attempts to confront its deepening fiscal crisis through draconian budget cuts that are falling with disproportionate force on New York City. It may well be that Paterson had no interest in handing the Senate seat to a Bloomberg ally.

In Gillibrand he has selected a Democratic congresswoman elected from one of the most Republican districts in the state. In that sense, the choice reflects the same kind of "nonpartisan" politics being promoted by the Obama administration, based on an effort to placate the Republican Party. A so-called "Blue Dog" Democrat in the House, her appointment will serve to further shift the Democratic caucus in the Senate to the right.

Her selection prompted outraged statements from immigrant and gun-control advocates because of her hard-line anti-immigrant positions in Congress and her 100 percent approval rating from the National Rifle Association.

The New York Immigration Coalition called her record "deeply troubling," pointing out that she supported legislation that would have required local police to enforce immigration law, while supporting a militarization of the US-Mexican border and opposing any means for undocumented immigrant workers in the US to legalize their status.

Gillibrand's selection also reportedly provoked the ire of Democratic politicians who were passed over by Paterson, and it is likely that she will face a primary challenge when she is forced to contest an election in 2010, when the remainder of Clinton's Senate term expires.

From the standpoint of state politics, the timing of the announcement was less than fortuitous. It came barely two hours before federal prosecutors handed down an eight-count official corruption indictment against the

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former Republican leader of the state senate, Joseph Bruno, who resigned five months ago from the seat he had held for 32 years.

While not named in the indictment, Gillibrand's father, Douglas Rutnik, a prominent Albany Republican lobbyist, had close political and business ties to Bruno.

The Republican connections enjoyed by Gillibrand and her father were symbolized at the press conference announcing her appointment by the former New York Republican Senator Al D'Amato, who stood directly behind her.

Gillibrand's grandmother was Dorothea "Polly" Noonan, described as the long-time "confidante" of Albany's former Mayor Erastus Corning, who held office for four decades and ran one of the most enduring and corrupt Democratic big city machines in the country.

Her selection for the Senate seat is largely attributed in the media to the crude political calculations of the state Democratic Party, which reportedly wanted an upstate, female and Republican-connected candidate to balance its ticket when Paterson faces an election in 2010.

The decision may also have been influenced by Hillary Clinton, who was confirmed as secretary of state by a Senate vote Wednesday. Gillibrand campaigned for Clinton in her first run for Senate in New York in 2000. Her right-wing politics were in sync with those of Clinton, who reciprocated by campaigning for Gillibrand in her 2006 run for the upstate congressional seat.

With Friday's appointment, New York now has both an unelected governor—Paterson assumed the office last March after Eliot Spitzer was forced to resign over a prostitution scandal—and an unelected senator, a fitting symbol of the state of "democracy" in the country's third-largest state.

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