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New York's political resurgence

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

New York, once a center of America's political world, long ago fell on hard times. Where the state was once practically guaranteed a slot on at least one of the presidential tickets, it has been many years since a New Yorker was a real contender for the presidency. And the record in Congress has been even worse — there the state always underperformed. But that may all be changing in a hurry. Former Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) is the overwhelming favorite for the Democratic presidential nomination and now, thanks to the retirement of Sen. Harry Reid, (D-Nev.), Sen. Chuck Schumer (N.Y.) is the likely next Democratic Leader in the Senate. For the first time in decades, the Empire State may be a state on the political rise.

Schumer's ascension may be the biggest break with history. For the better part of a century, New York was the presidential incubator. But the state has never been particularly successful in Congress. No New Yorker has ever served as Senate Majority or Minority Leader. It had one Minority Whip — the first one ever, back in 1915. Since then, no other New Yorker has served in the top two positions in the upper chamber.

New Yorkers haven't exactly grabbed the reigns in the House either — the state has only elected two Speakers of the House — the last one, Theodore Pomeroy, left office in 1869. Even the lower leadership positions have been bereft of New Yorkers. The state has provided one House Majority Leader — the very first one, Sereno Payne. He last held the position in 1911. It had one Minority Leader, Bertrand Snell, who retired in 1939. The last New Yorker who served as a Whip (the third ranking position) left in 1919.

Perhaps as noteworthy as anything is that the members of this small group of legislative leaders were all Republicans. Even though New York has become the second biggest Democratic state, prior to Schumer, the Democrats have not produced any leaders in Congress.

There's no good reason for this record. This failure to produce noteworthy legislative leaders isn't because smaller states are afraid the most populous ones will overwhelm them and take control. Texas has been remarkably successful in grooming leaders of both the House (Speakers John Nance Garner, Sam Rayburn and Jim Wright, Majority Leaders Dick Armev and Tom DeLay) and the Senate (Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson and current Majority Whip John Cornyn (R)). California has also been very successful, as can be seen by former Speaker and current House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D) and current Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R). The reality is that New York has just done a poor job of getting their best politicians into positions of power in Congress. While the state has had a handful of noteworthy committee chairmen over the last century, arguably the last truly noteworthy leaders of the chambers were practically forgotten Gilded Age politicians like Roscoe Conkling and Thomas Platt, who fought battles over patronage, and were fairly uninterested in policy.

What makes Schumer's move up the ladder particularly impressive for the state is that it comes at the same time Hillary Clinton has established the leadership position in Democratic presidential field. While she's a transplant, unlike the Brooklyn-born Schumer, New Yorkers have not looked askew at non-natives, especially since they elected her to two terms in the Senate.

If she does gain the nomination, she will be breaking a different long and inglorious streak for the state. From 1868 through 1948, there were only two elections in which New York did not have a candidate on the ballot as either president or vice president. In 1904 and 1944, both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates were New Yorkers. But since 1948, New York has been practically shut out — not a single presidential nominee and just three losing vice presidential candidates, two of them were losers in the biggest blow-outs in history. The state also managed one appointed vice president, Nelson Rockefeller, who was quickly dropped from the ballot when the next election came around.

While there is no one major reason for New York's drop in producing presidential contenders, the state's fall in the population rankings from first to fourth is certainly one good reason for it. Notice the two states that have basically replaced New York on the national ticket — California (Nixon, Reagan) and Texas (Johnson and both Bushes).

Whatever the reasons, it has been a long time since New York could claim a place as home to the top elected leaders in D.C. The rise of Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton suggests that this fallow period may be at an end.

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