



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 13, 2010

Kennedy Calls an End to Turbulent Career

Patrick Kennedy's decision not to seek reelection to Congress will bring to an end, at least temporarily, his family's decades-long "dynasty" and his own turbulent political career. Barring an unanticipated fun by another Kennedy, next year there will be not Kennedy in elected federal office for the first time since 1947.



Kennedy's political career began when he was elected to the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1988, becoming at 21 the youngest member of the Kennedy family ever to hold elective office. He served three terms before running for Congress. The youngest child of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the last of the Kennedy officeholders is in the final year of his eighth consecutive term as U.S. Representative from Rhode Island's First District, a seat he first won in 1994, despite a tidal wave that swept Republicans that year into control of both houses of Congress. Kennedy, now 42, entered Congress at age 27, two years younger than his uncle John F. Kennedy was when he won his first House race at age 29. A rising star in the party, the Rhode Island representative was chosen chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 2000.

Kennedy has taped an ad, now on the Internet, about his decision to leave office. It is scheduled to run on Rhode Island television stations on Sunday. In his video message, Kennedy cited the death of his father from brain cancer last August.

"Illness took the life of my most cherished mentor and confidante, my ultimate source of spirit and strength," he said, his words accompanied by a black-and-white photo on the screen, showing him as a boy sailing with his father. "From the countless lives he lifted, to the American promise he helped shape, my father taught me that politics at its very core was about serving others." Kennedy, who has battled mental health, alcohol, and drug issues, had also spoken to *Rhode Island Monthly* magazine about his decision.

"It's pretty simple in this respect: I went through something that caused me a great deal of soul searching and self-reflection," he said in an interview now published online. "Right now, a personal life is of greater value. Emotional connections that are real and loving and personal just trump everything



else."

Kennedy was also facing what might have been a tough battle for reelection against Republican John Loughlin III, a state representative. He was obviously disappointed with last month's election of Republican Scott Brown to the Senate seat Kennedy's father had held for 46 and one-half years. He publicly called Brown's election "a joke" and said Brown wanted to be seated quickly after the special election so he could help Republicans block an appointment by President Obama to the National Labor Relations Board.

The *Boston Globe* quoted two unnamed Democratic Party officials saying that the prospect of a challenging race this fall was a factor in the congressman's decision, but that the death of his father played a much larger role. Sean Richardson, a former chief of staff to the Rhode Island lawmaker, told the *Globe* that Kennedy no longer had the "fire in the belly" for a political campaign. Apparently, Rhode Island voters are not exactly on fire for Kennedy, either. On February 4, WPRI-TV 12 in Providence released the results of a poll the station commissioned, showing 56 percent of the voters surveyed in his district view Kennedy unfavorably, while just 42 percent gave him a favorable rating. Only 35 percent said they would vote to reelect him. The poll was conducted by Fleming & Associates, who interviewed 250 voters in the district. The poll has a margin of error of 6.2 percent, the TV station reported.

Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Kennedy has made mental health the focal point of his career. His crowning legislative achievement was the passage in 2008 of mental health parity legislation, requiring most insurance plans to cover mental illnesses the same way they do physical ailments. Kennedy had championed the bill for more than a decade. In the *Rhode Island Monthly* article, "His Father's Son," Mark Arsenault describes Kennedy as one who "can be compulsive and hyperbolic yet is known in Congress as a conciliator." He is often unfairly compared to his more famous father, Arsenault said, but he apparently has acquired some of the veteran Senator's political skills.

"By many accounts, Patrick is an accomplished inside player in Washington, who understands that more work gets done in the halls of Congress than on the floor," Arsenault wrote.

But the controversies, both personal and political, that have followed Kennedy throughout his career may have contributed to his negative ratings. He has acknowledged being treated for cocaine during his teenage years and admitted he abused drugs and alcohol while a student at Providence College. During Easter weekend in 1991, he and cousin William Kennedy Smith returned to the Palm Beach home of Edward M. Kennedy with two young women they had met that evening at a local bar. One of the women accused Smith of rape and in the highly publicized trial that followed, the prosecution claimed that the Senator, his son, and nephew had all conspired to cover up the alleged crime. Smith was acquitted and no charges were brought against the Kennedys.

In 2000, a female security guard at Los Angeles International Airport accused Kennedy of pushing her. City prosecutors decided not to bring charges against the Congressman, but Kennedy ended a civil suit with an undisclosed settlement two years later. He crashed his automobile into a Capital Hill barricade in 2006 and claimed at the time he was disoriented from prescription medicines. Kennedy also told officers he was late for a vote, though the last House vote had been taken several hours before the 2:45 a.m. accident. Though one of the officers said Kennedy appeared intoxicated, no sobriety test was administered and an officer drove the Congressman home.

The next day Kennedy said he had no recollection of the accident and said he had an addiction to prescription drugs and would return to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where had previously



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been treated for addictions. Asked if he had expected special treatment by D.C. authorities, Kennedy said he hoped they would treat him as though he "were an African-American in Anacostia," a museum in Washington dedicated to African-American history.

In 2007, Kennedy was one of the few Democrats who decided to keep campaign contributions from convicted fundraiser Norman Hsu. A few years earlier the "compulsive and hyperbolic" tendencies that Arsenault described caused some embarrassment when the Congressman stated, "I have never worked a f*****g day in my life." A spokesman later said it was a satirical statement in response to repeated charges that he had never worked.

His most recent controversy came over a public clash with Catholic Bishop of Providence Thomas Tobin over Kennedy's support for the freedom to abort. Kennedy last year criticized the nation's Catholic bishops for opposing any healthcare reform legislation that did not include a ban on federal funding for abortion. Kennedy later told a reporter that Bishop Tobin had instructed him not to receive Holy Communion and had also instructed priests in the diocese not to give him Communion. But the bishop said it was not an "instruction," but a request he made in a letter he sent to Kennedy nearly three years earlier, and that he had neither requested nor instructed any parish priests to withhold the sacrament.

"If I had told 300 priests of the diocese in any format not to give Communion to Kennedy or anybody else, you think that would have remained confidential?" the bishop said in an interview with the *Providence Journal*. Tobin said he had intended his letter to Kennedy to be confidential, but felt obliged to set the record straight after Kennedy "broke it open."

Whether or not it was related to his decision not to seek another term, an open conflict with his bishop would not have been helpful to Kennedy in the most heavily Catholic state in the country. He intends as a private citizen to work on issues related to mental health and addictions and hopes to use his famous name, experience, and connections to highlight his causes.

"I'm not going to be afraid to use my political leverage," he said in the *Rhode Island Monthly* interview. "I'm just not going to do it twenty-four-seven." But the major part of his political leverage, as well as his "ultimate source of spirit and strength," is now gone.

"It's tough to get up and go to work every day when your partner is not there," Mark Weiner, a major Democratic fund raiser in Rhode Island, told the *Washington Times*. "I think he just had a broken heart after his father passed away."

Photo of Patrick Kennedy: AP Images



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