

The Boston Globe

For Democrats - Alan Khazei for Senate

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ONE MAN'S talents and fame are not the only reasons why the US Senate seat being filled in January is legendary. The seat is the vehicle for promoting the ideas of a vast network of Massachusetts leaders in fields as varied as health care, science, law, and, of course, politics. Just as this state is a testing ground for national policies, a senator from Massachusetts should be a leader and an innovator, and an exemplar of the Commonwealth's tradition of progressive values and independent thought.

The chance to replace one of history's greatest legislators, Ted Kennedy, attracted a diverse field of Democrats. Predictably, none matches Kennedy's ability to represent both evergreen values and futuristic thinking. Each comes from a different strand of Massachusetts' leadership network: business, law, government, and citizen activism. Each represents a cylinder of the state's policy engine but not the whole machine.

Any new senator will have to grow in the job. Voters must decide who has the capacity to become a great senator in his or her own right, and fully vindicate the interests of their Massachusetts constituents.

With high hopes, the Globe endorses Alan Khazei, the prime mover behind national-service policies, as Massachusetts' best chance to produce another great senator.

The 48-year-old Khazei offers a strong vision for success in the Senate, channeling the energy of activist groups and private-sector policy incubators while dedicating himself to the laborious task of building legislative coalitions.

He offers a time-tested and relevant example of this approach: his two decades of work bringing together politicians of both parties and citizen-activists to develop a national service plan. The recent service bill named for Kennedy and providing for 250,000 volunteers in a domestic Peace Corps is largely the fruit of his labors.

Khazei promises to apply the same principles to other issues, believing that building a grass-roots network for change while demonstrating both commitment and a willingness to compromise in pursuit of common ground can break down political barriers. This isn't just hopeful rhetoric. Khazei speaks admiringly of streetwise education reformers who, having seen challenging conditions in urban classrooms, dreamed up such innovations as charter schools and Teach for America. Along the way, these activists had to elbow their way around established interest groups that tried to squeeze them out of the policy debate. With the support of an energetic and idealistic senator, public policy can flourish.

Extended to issues like health care, the environment, energy, and job training, this entrepreneurial model of progressive politics offers hope for real improvements. It moves away from Reagan-era skepticism about government without relying on traditional government programs to provide all the answers.

In supporting Khazei, the Globe believes that this state's future depends on new ideas. The next Massachusetts senator should be the person who best embodies forward-looking thinking, and not the traditional paths to power.

All of Khazei's Democratic rivals are impressive in their own realms. Representative Michael Capuano proudly combines a bring-home-the-bacon approach to politics and a steadfast independence

exemplified by his votes against the Iraq war and the Patriot Act.

Capuano traces his virtues to his working-class roots. Despite his close family, Ivy League education, and successful career in Congress, he believes himself to be underestimated and type-cast because of his Somerville upbringing. He often expresses a sense of class-based anger. Any such us-against-them attitude is inherently divisive, and makes a deeply admirable quality - his desire to stand up for average people - seem more like personal grievance. Capuano could well broaden his approach in the Senate, but his decision to base his current campaign on populist anger suggests that he doesn't really want to change.

Attorney General Martha Coakley, by contrast, is measured and analytical. An exemplary public servant, Coakley has spent her life in law enforcement, as a prosecutor and, for the past three years, as the state's top public advocate.

She combines a no-nonsense courtroom demeanor with a down-to-earth reasonableness - a personality that would play well in the Senate. But she hasn't displayed as much policy drive and legislative energy as her rivals; her approach to a proposed second stimulus plan is to wait and test the effectiveness of the first one. It's a responsible, perhaps even refreshing, instinct, but one more befitting an AG than a senator confronting the worst job picture since the Great Depression.

Private-equity partner Stephen Pagliuca promises to apply his business acumen to the economy, and if he were running for governor, his experience sizing up companies would be directly transferable to the public realm. As a senator, he would be in a position of advising his colleagues on business and health care policy, another of his specialties.

A wealthy man, Pagliuca sincerely wishes to give back to his community, a spirit that animates both his part-ownership of the Boston Celtics and his commitment to helping build a life-sciences center in Allston. He comes across less as a senator than as a builder or entrepreneur. Pagliuca would be a valuable adviser to the next senator, but an imperfect fit for the job itself.

Khazei, for his part, is also a risk. His policy background is unconventional, and he was unknown to most voters before launching his short campaign. But in choosing a senator who could end up serving a long time, Massachusetts should concentrate on a candidate's potential, as much as any other single factor.

All four Democrats are likely to vote the same way on most major issues. The differences lie in leadership and personal style. In both, Khazei's brimming potential stands out.

At this moment, he is more of an impassioned amateur than a seasoned pro. But his energy, idealism, and intelligence - combined with a grounded sense of how the Senate works - is unusual, and gives voters a chance to support a new, home-grown approach to politics. He isn't trying to line up just enough constituencies to eke out a win; he's asking voters to sign on to a vision - a less top-down, less programmatic way of improving people's lives. His emphasis on capturing the energy of private initiatives and translating it into the conventions of the Senate feels rooted in Massachusetts and the Kennedy legacy, but also appropriate to this moment in history.