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Alan Khazei: The Best Bet to Carry Ted Kennedy's Legacy Forward

On Dec. 8, Massachusetts voters will have a rare opportunity to elect one of the nation's leading social entrepreneurs to Congress. Alan Khazei, the founder of City Year, is making a bid to fill the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's senate seat. A political newcomer with a track record of amazing practical accomplishments, Khazei is well suited to carry on Kennedy's legacy and help President Obama advance meaningful change.

Khazei's campaign has been likened to a 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' run. But Khazei is no novice. He is one of the country's most respected reformers and his work with City Year is studied in universities around the world. He has demonstrated the savvy, persuasive skills and commitment needed to realize big ideas.

In 1988, Khazei cofounded City Year to demonstrate how national service programs—non-military, structured opportunities for citizens to serve—could transform society. At the time, national service was an idea that had been discussed for more than 80 years, but nobody had ever figured out how to give it political legs. Under Khazei's leadership, City Year's "corps members" became charismatic ambassadors for national service -- so impressive that Bill Clinton asked Khazei to help him create AmeriCorps based on his model, which has spread to 19 cities, as well as to South Africa.

Khazei later demonstrated political acumen when he led a movement to defeat Republican attempts to dismantle AmeriCorps. This past April, President Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, legislation that Khazei worked to advance with Sen. Kennedy and his co-sponsor Sen. Orrin Hatch, and other lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. The act triples the reach of AmeriCorps and expands service opportunities for older Americans. Because of Khazei, national service is today a living reality that has transformed 600,000 lives and strengthened thousands of social organizations.

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For twenty years, Khazei has worked alongside the nation's leading innovators. Groups like Teach for America, College Summit, Year Up, Ashoka, the Harlem Children's Zone and the KIPP schools. These organizations are demonstrating outstanding results against tough social problems. As a U.S. Senator, Khazei will bring a rare, in depth understanding of promising new ideas and models into Congress so they can be made to work for the people of Massachusetts and all Americans. He has proven that he understands and deeply cares about implementation, the toughest part of governing, and knows how to take a vision and make it work at scale, while maintaining integrity.

Although he is new to electoral politics, he has also shown that he can navigate political waters and build constituencies for his ideas. In 2008, he enlisted the support of hundreds of leaders behind a campaign for national service. They included Barack Obama and John McCain, who shared a stage two months before the presidential election, as well as Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn), Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Arnold Schwarzenegger and Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Khazei has built a reputation as a trustworthy, pragmatic, approachable and plain speaking reformer. At a time, when Washington desperately needs to move from a destructive polarization towards collaborative problem solving, he is ideally suited to lead the way forward. As Jonathan Alter noted in Newsweek, he is the only candidate running to fill Sen. Kennedy's seat who backs the meaningful education reform that President Obama seeks to advance and Sen. Kennedy championed. He has also refused to take campaign contributions from lobbyists.

Khazei is the real deal. He demonstrated commitment to public service for years when no one was looking. Now, after two decades of success outside government, he is ready to bring into office a mature understanding of what it takes – really takes -- to lead changes that will improve people's lives.