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Summer Internship Report
September 2006

Confirming My Desire to Run

Thanks to the generous support of the Women in Public Policy Program at the Kennedy School of Government, this summer, I had the privilege of working for U.S. Senator John F. Kerry (D-MA) in the Senator's Boston Office. I served as the Political Assistant to the State Director, and from this position, I was able to experience every aspect of the Senate Office's work—from policy development, to constituent services, to event planning and political relationship building. This multidimensional internship gave me the opportunity to see how a legislator's office operates and allowed me the hands-on experience to gain the skills necessary to succeed in this environment.

More importantly, this opportunity was an important step in my journey to running for public office. I learned that I truly enjoy the day-to-day work of a legislator. I found that I was not dissuaded by the challenging lifestyle and public spot light that I saw come with elected office. I grew my network, meeting senate staffers, state and local officials, members of the press, and other professionals who will be invaluable sources of wisdom and support in the coming years. And most of all, I found myself in a profession that motivated me both personally and intellectually—confirming my belief that I want to run for public office.

Day-to-Day Work – Lessons Learned

1) The interconnectedness of policy, politics, press, and the public:

Essentially the chief of staff for the state office, Senator Kerry's State Director is responsible for overseeing the entire operations of the Senator's Massachusetts Senate Office. As his assistant, I had the opportunity to work on projects in all areas of the office and to contribute to policy, political, press, and constituency objectives. With each project, I learned more about the operations of the Senate and how elected officials accomplish their goals. Moreover, I learned how interconnected all of these areas are.

For example, on the policy side, I was responsible for making sure the Senator and the Washington, D.C. office were up-to-date on the most pressing events happening in Massachusetts. Each Friday, I wrote a memo, summarizing the week's major events. However, in addition to simply presenting the facts of particular stories, these memos analyzed how events were shaping state and local politics, discussed the amount of press each story was receiving, and highlighted constituents' reactions. During the weeks following the tragic collapse of the Big Dig Tunnel, for instance, my memos provided the Senator with a concise overview of the structural engineering flaws, the effects on traffic patterns and commutes, the public's outrage and fear of future problems, and the political fallout as the Governor called for the Turnpike Authority Chairman's resignation.

Constituent services was another place where the various functions came together and sometimes collided. Unlike the Washington D.C. office, where the focus is on legislative work, a large percentage of the state office's work revolves around providing constituency services. Before this summer, I had only a vague idea about what this term meant, and it was fascinating to learn what constituents contact their elected officials about. In many cases, constituents simply wanted to voice their opinions to the Senator about a particular policy matter. For example, during debate of the Kerry-Feingold amendment to establish a timetable for the redeployment of

troops in Iraq, phones were ringing off the hook with expressions of both support and opposition. Similarly, constituents flooded the office with calls, emails, and letters, wanting to know where the Senator stood as the conflict between Israel and Lebanon broke out. I was impressed by the real time reaction of the public to various policy debates and encouraged to see an electorate engaged in current events and expressing their views to their elected official—it was representative government at work. Yet, I also noted that officials tend to hear more from their opposition than their supporters, and often, issues that from the legislator’s viewpoint, seem to importantly impact people’s lives go largely unnoticed by the public.

In addition to voter opinions and policy debates, however, the Senator received hundreds of requests each day from Massachusetts residents seeking the Senator’s aid. I was surprised by the diversity of these requests—everything from help finding public assistance dollars to requests for letters of recommendations to appeals for the Senator’s help in dealing with government agencies on personal matters. While routine requests were handled fairly mechanically, I was intrigued to see how some requests required substantial analysis. Political factors had to be weighed—does this person have the support of an important part of the electorate, such as a union or the AARP? Practical factors were considered—is there anything the Senator can actually do to help? Ethical ramifications were examined—what is the right thing to do given the facts of the case and the reality of scarce resources? The press angle was measured—would you want to see this in the Boston Globe? As I participated in the decision making process of whether and how the Senator should respond to a constituent’s request, it was eye-opening to see how these factors interplayed with one another.

2) How to build and maintain strong in-state relationships:

Working in the State Office gave me the opportunity to see how federally elected officials balance their commitments in Washington, D.C. and their home states. Senator Kerry traveled to Massachusetts almost every week, however, the businesses of lawmaking meant his meetings and events in state were typically limited to Fridays and Mondays and were often in threat of cancellation due to Senate votes in Washington. Given this reality, the Senator was seeking new and better ways to reach out to state and local officials and their communities and enhance his “virtual” presence in the state.

As part of this push, I produced the inaugural edition of the “Monthly Recap”—a monthly email sent from the State Director to all state and local officials, updating them on Senator Kerry’s recent work for the Commonwealth. The “Recap” highlighted the Senator’s events in Massachusetts, his legislative efforts on Capitol Hill, and any upcoming happenings that would be of interest to state and local officials. In addition, I also aided the office in its launch of the “Federal Grants Update.” Another monthly email, the Update is sent to all state senators and representatives, mayors, selectmen, town administrators, and town managers and is designed to help these officials find federal funds for their communities. Thousands of grant opportunities are available from federal agencies at any given time, and the Update combed through these, providing officials with a concise list of those grants that are most relevant to Massachusetts’ communities. Both the Recap and the Update were received favorably, with particularly positive response from city and town officials. In addition to these efforts, I saw throughout the summer the various ways in which the Senate office staff proactively reached out to state and local officials, letting these leaders know what resources the Senate Office could provide as they addressed the needs of Massachusetts residents.

3) The importance of a well-prepared staff:

While much of my work was done comfortably behind the scenes from the Senate office, I also had the opportunity to staff the Senator at a number of public events. These experiences were in many ways the most fun but the most nerve-wracking of the summer, and they taught me the importance of having a well-prepared staff. My most memorable experience was my first event—a relatively small ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new boys home. I was the point person for the event: I met with the event organizers prior to the event to discuss logistics. I wrote up a full briefing for the Senator on the event, describing the ceremony’s program, the history of the boy’s home, the biographies of notable guests and provided talking points for his remarks. I arrived at the site early to finalize preparations, and I staffed him at the event, being at the ready with any information that he might need. It was hours of preparation for a 45-minute ceremony. When I was assigned the project, the state director only half-jokingly told me, “I have every confidence that you can do this, but—you can’t screw up.” While this bit of advice made me more nervous, it was true—the Senator’s success at this event was directly tied to how well I prepared.

Putting It All Together – My Future

When I took this internship, I had three major goals that I wanted to accomplish: First, I wanted to develop a better understanding of politics, complementing my past experience in the policy arena. Second, I wanted to build my political network in the state. Third, I wanted to gain an on-the-ground appreciation for the day-to-day life of a U.S. legislator. Together, these three would allow me to advance my larger goal of running for elected office.

This summer, I accomplished these goals. Without a doubt, I learned what it is like to be a U.S. legislator and what type of organization you need to put in place to succeed. I saw how challenging the lifestyle is—with long hours and hard work, squeezed time with family and constant public scrutiny. Yet, I also saw how rewarding the work is, and in my own calculation, I have come to believe the benefits of public service outweigh these costs. I found that I am motivated personally and intellectually by this job, and it has confirmed my desire to one day run.

The internship also gave me the opportunity to meet new people and build my network around the state. Over the course of the summer, I built solid relationships with the Senator's staff, I spent time with state and local officials, and I met a variety of professionals in politics, press, the nonprofit sector, and other industries in Massachusetts. Moreover, I learned who the state's major players are—from business leaders to union presidents to party chairmen to opinion gurus. Undoubtedly, this knowledge and these connections will prove invaluable in any future race.

Finally, my knowledge of politics grew exponentially. I saw many of the theories and ideas that I had learned during my first year at the Kennedy School played out in the real world and began to understand where theory and practice diverge. I saw first hand how policy agendas have to be packaged in order to navigate them through the political reality of competing interests and how election year concerns can stall forward progress in both the state house and the U.S. Congress. I saw how personalities affect government and relationships drive change. While I was concerned that as I learned more about politics, I would be put off by it, I found myself enjoying the gamesmanship, and I developed an even greater appreciation for the wisdom of our nation's founders in creating a political system that forces compromise and limits reckless lawmaking.

Together, the lessons I learned this summer helped me to build the skills, foundational knowledge, and appreciation of politics that I will need to run for and succeed in public office. I thank the Women in Public Policy Program, particularly the *From Harvard Square to the Oval Office Program*, for their support this summer. Without it, these lessons would have been harder and longer learned. But thanks to it, my journey to elected office is confidently under way.