

## **U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand: An Upstate Heroine**

The appointment of Kirsten Gillibrand to the U.S. Senate is cause for celebration among rural Americans. At 42, New York's new junior senator becomes the youngest member of "the world's greatest deliberative body."

An Albany native, Gillibrand captured the upstate 20<sup>th</sup> congressional district in 2006 with 53 percent, spending more than \$2.5 million to oust Republican John Sweeney. Last year, she beat a wealthy GOP opponent, winning with 62%. Gillibrand was the first House member to publicize her daily schedule online and took the lead in posting her earmark requests on her website. In 2007, she impressed Speaker Nancy Pelosi so much that she was given a visible role in helping craft the bill implementing the 9/11 Commission recommendations and was named to the Steering and Policy Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

As a freshmen member of the House Agriculture Committee, she succeeded in attaching two measures to the 2007 Farm Bill, a "buy local" amendment that directs USDA to provide loans to businesses that promote sourcing and distribution of products within 400 miles of the farms where the product was produced, and \$50 million in grants for small farms to transition to organic production. She has been a forceful advocate for northeast dairy producers and a strong voice for broadband connectivity to rural areas. The New York Farm Bureau gives her high marks.

For her part, Gillibrand has pledged to try and keep her committee assignments of agriculture and Armed Services in the Senate. "Investing in agribusiness and small farms and a concerted focus on new energy technologies and innovations will be my focus as senator," she said upon being named to fill Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's seat. While Gillibrand is for pay-as-you-go fiscal restraint in budgeting, she is also for marriage equality and is pro-choice. Last October, she gave birth to her second child (eight-month old Henry) the baby brother of five-year old Theo.

At the announcement in Albany last week, Sen. Chuck Schumer said "having someone who is actually from upstate is a real plus." The Brooklyn-born and bred Schumer (who is said to have worked behind the scenes to lobby Gov. David Patterson for Gillibrand) has earned high marks for being visible across the Empire State. He visits all 62 counties each year and is not afraid to get his wingtips dirty in a cow lot.

Because Gillibrand is a centrist and member of the Blue Dog Coalition, she has already come in for criticism from some downstate Dems. One congresswoman from Long Island, whose passion is gun control, is already threatening to primary Gillibrand in 2010 because of her 100% rating from the NRA. Like her mother, Gillibrand is a hunter and has worked to protect hunters' rights. Many of her constituents' bag game and deer to put in the freezer, a notion totally foreign to those apartment dwellers on Manhattan's Upper East Side. City slickers need to know that defending sportsmen does not mean you condone gun violence. Upon being selected as senator, Gillibrand committed to working to update background checks to keep guns out of the hands of criminals.

Years of declining manufacturing and out-migration of young people upstate have again conspired to deprive the state of a congressional seat after the next census. It is anticipated that this seat will be carved from GOP turf in western New York. With the exception of the Staten Island-based seat won last year due to scandal, all the gains made by Democrats over the last two election cycles have been upstate. These would include the 19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> (along with Gillibrand's 20<sup>th</sup>) districts which Dems won in 2006 and the 25<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> CDs picked up in 2008, all safe Republican territory for years.

This change in party control helped flip the Congress in 2006 and resulted in the ascension of three full committee chairmanships (including the powerful Rules and Ways & Means panels) and nine subcommittee gavels, all held by downstate members of the New York delegation. In making his pick, Gov. Patterson mentioned the tendency for downstate pols to condescend to their upstate brethren. "They will never condescend to Kirsten Gillibrand in the U.S. Senate," Patterson said.