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Kennedy searches for his base

The congressman's allies are feuding with Markey's over who is best-positioned to represent people of color.



Rep. Joseph Kennedy III at a Juneteenth rally on June 19 in Boston

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In a primary season that's seen progressives oust powerful incumbents, the race in Massachusetts's Senate primary is in a category of its own.

Rep. Joe Kennedy III is not arguing that he's a progressive firebrand. One of his key arguments: The groups who have not traditionally had access to power—like people of color and the working class—largely support him. Sen. Ed Markey, Kennedy suggests, has not shown up in their communities.

“It was never more evident that we were the stepchild of Eastern Massachusetts than during the coronavirus pandemic,” said Springfield City Council President Justin Hurst, who has endorsed Kennedy and is Black. “We didn't see [Markey] during COVID-19.”

Hurst contrasted Markey with Kennedy, who he described as “a phone call away,” and noted that he and the congressman both attended a recent protest against the killing of George Floyd.

“There were not many leaders present who didn't look like me,” Hurst said. “He wasn't afraid of the ramifications. ... We need people who are not afraid because issues might seem dicey.”

Democrats in the state say that Kennedy, who speaks Spanish, has also excited many Latino voters.

But John Walsh, Markey's campaign manager, said the assertion that Kennedy has more support from people of color in office was “ridiculous.”

“The most prominent [elected officials of color] in Massachusetts—you'll find they're all with Ed,” Walsh said.

He pointed to state Rep. Nika Elugardo and Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins, both women of color who have backed Markey. One of the most famous Black women in Massachusetts politics, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, has said she wouldn't endorse either candidate.

During a forum Tuesday night, when asked why he didn't support Pressley in her 2018 primary, Kennedy was quick to point out that Markey had not backed her either. But unlike Markey, Kennedy backed her opponent, Rep. Mike Capuano. Rollins told *National Journal* that Kennedy also worked against her during her own 2018 campaign, knocking on doors for her opponent, a white man named Greg Henning who previously worked with the congressman. Markey, on the other hand, was speaking to her "well before the primary."

She took issue with the suggestion that Kennedy had more support among people of color, pointing out how broad that group is, and how minorities should not be treated as a monolith.

If Kennedy wins, "we're not getting an Ayanna Pressley. We're getting a privileged, entitled person," Rollins said.

"As a woman of color, I wouldn't get seven years and have not much to show for it and then swing to my next opportunity," she added, referring to Kennedy's tenure in the House.

Issues of racial justice came up in another context this week when the father of DJ Henry, who was killed by police 10 years ago, said Markey didn't do enough to intervene at the time. He also alleged that the now-senator used the word "colored" in their conversation.

Markey apologized, saying he did not remember using that word, and called on the attorney general to reopen the case.

“If this was two years ago, I don’t know if he’d be able to survive something like that,” said Wilnelia Rivera, the president of Rivera Consulting, who worked for Steve Pemberton when he was challenging Markey last year. Now, she suggested, the relationships he’s built and his quick pivot will lessen the impact. Still, polling has provided some evidence that people of color largely support Kennedy. An poll from Emerson College and Boston TV station WHDH conducted in May, for example, found Kennedy leading among Black voters 59 to 41 percent.

Both campaigns told *National Journal* that their internal polling has shown the race has tightened significantly since last year, when a *Boston Globe*/Suffolk University [poll \(/s/681296/poll-kennedy-42-markey-28\)](/s/681296/poll-kennedy-42-markey-28) found Kennedy leading 42 to 28 percent in a head-to-head matchup. A recent JMC Analytics [poll \(/s/708861/poll-markey-40-kennedy-36\)](/s/708861/poll-markey-40-kennedy-36) found Markey ahead, 44 to 41.

While his campaign argues that Kennedy is especially popular among moderate and conservative Democrats, Markey allies say supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders have lined up behind the senator. That includes Our Revolution, the Sunrise Movement, and the Progressive Democrats of America. Several progressive groups that did not throw their weight behind Sanders have also opted to support Markey, as have most major environmental groups.

“Senator Markey’s just in a class by himself,” said Craig Auster, senior director of political affairs at the League of Conservation Voters, which has endorsed the senator.

Other organizations, like MoveOn and Democracy for America, have so far stayed out of the contest. But as a whole, national progressive groups overwhelmingly backed Markey after he put time into developing relationships

with them and advancing their priorities—most notably, the Green New Deal, which he coauthored.

“Markey has come to understand that he has to move to the left to maintain relevance to the general electorate,” Rivera said. “When he decided in 2018 to align himself with [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], he was making an investment in his future political relevance.”

Walsh, Markey’s campaign manager, sees it a little differently.

“Most of the people with 40 years in Washington were backing away from her. ... Ed Markey, maybe seeing a bit of himself in her, shook her hand and they wrote the Green New Deal,” said Walsh.

He described Markey’s early years as an elected official, when he pushed for a redistricting project [to create a majority-Black state Senate district](https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/07/31/ed-markey-joe-kennedy-black-lives-matter).

(<https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/07/31/ed-markey-joe-kennedy-black-lives-matter>). Colleagues warned him against the move, suggesting he’d make enemies who would make it harder for him to win back his own seat.

“Ed Markey voted for it, which sort of branded him as a troublemaker,” Walsh said.

Later in the conversation, Walsh implied that Kennedy had a very different reputation.

“Joe Kennedy is on every progressive piece of legislation at the moment it becomes consensus,” Walsh said. “Where was the vote that you took where you risked your political career?”

Several Democratic strategists said they didn’t see much policy daylight between the candidates, and didn’t view one as more progressive than the other.

Meanwhile, in conversations with *National Journal*, more than one national

progressive figure called Kennedy “corporate,” although they didn’t offer examples to support that claim. Others called him a “standard Democrat” or a “blah Democrat”—as opposed to a progressive leader.

That characterization, Markey’s allies say, does not have to last forever. Kennedy’s campaign rests on the premise that, like the young insurgents of color who have ousted incumbents over the past few years, he’s not going to wait his turn. But many wish he would. Given time, they say, Kennedy could truly prove his progressive credentials.

“It’s hard to think of one progressive issue where he has led the charge,” said Adam Green, cofounder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, which has backed Markey. “We would be happy to work with him in the House to build a partnership on progressive issues, but that hasn’t happened yet.”