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Scott Brown and history's long roster of border-jumping politicians

The former Massachusetts senator may run for a seat in neighboring New Hampshire. He'd hardly be the first politician to make such a move

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

After passing on entering yet another Massachusetts special election for a U.S. Senate seat, Scott Brown grabbed some attention last week by mentioning that he may set his future slightly northward, with a possible run at New Hampshire's Senate seat, currently held by Jeanne Shaheen. While New Hampshire is certainly more fertile ground for a Republican candidate than Massachusetts is, there is a good chance this is just talk. But if Brown did decide to run, he would hardly be the first elected official to make that jump. One of his most illustrious predecessors actually made the exact reverse commute in his rise to fame.

Daniel Webster, who gained everlasting fame as a congressman and senator from Massachusetts, started his political career as a congressman from New Hampshire. It was not an unusual move, as border-jumping by elected officials occurred frequently in the nineteenth century. The transient nature of America and the continual allure of the frontier meant that politicians were constantly able to find a new place to run.

Webster wasn't the only famed official to switch states as an elected official — Sam Houston served as governor of Tennessee before leading Texas to independence and serving as both senator and governor of the Lone Star State. And one man, James Shields, even managed to serve Senate terms for three different states — Illinois, Minnesota, and Missouri.

This behavior went out of style once the frontier closed, and perhaps more importantly, once U.S. senators started being directly elected after the passage of the 17th Amendment. There has since been only a smattering of officials who managed to win federal office in two states. The last time it happened was back in 1968, when former Texas Rep. Ed Foreman slid across the border to gain a House seat in New Mexico.

Though it has been a long time since anyone succeeded in pulling off a two-state career, there have been plenty of candidates who have flirted with the idea. After seeing his district effectively wiped out in a reapportionment/gerrymander squeeze, Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich very publicly considered running for a very liberal seat in Washington state. Other candidates actually succeeded in gaining their party's nomination. Former Tennessee Sen. Bill Brock was Maryland's Republican nominee for Senate in 1994, though he lost badly to incumbent Sen. Paul Sarbanes. Another recent example: Georgia congressman and former "Dukes of Hazard" star Ben Jones took the Democratic nomination for a Virginia House seat in 2002 on the way to being blown out by current House Majority Leader Eric Cantor.

The failures of Brock and Jones point out the limitations of border-jumping and part of the difficulty facing Brown. Their previous celebrity helped them get their party's nomination. But the reason they weren't facing serious challenges in the primary process was because the incumbents they were challenging seemed so formidable. If it was a more winnable race, a long-term local figure might have been more willing to get into the game.

This may present a challenge to Brown, as New Hampshire has its share of prominent Republicans. Furthermore, Brown's relatively moderate stands may turn off supporters and donors, who feel that it is fine to have those positions in Massachusetts, but not New Hampshire.

And yet, Brown is well known in the Granite State simply because much of New Hampshire saw the stream of commercials in his Senate race. Plus, thanks to national cable outlets, social media, and the internet, there are a growing number of officeholders — including Brown — who have developed their own platform for success. Their popularity, tied with an impressive donor list, allows them to effectively exist outside of the traditional party structure. Such popularity could well be portable.

In the end, Scott Brown would have a difficult road ahead if he seeks a New Hampshire Senate seat. But history shows that it has been done. And Brown's own success in crafting a national political identity may enable him to be the candidate to do it again.