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Alabama Senate profile: Robert Kennedy Jr. says he's more than a name

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Robert Kennedy Jr. knows who he shares his name with. And he knows that it might bring him some votes.

But, he says, the reason he's led at least one public poll of the Democratic field for U.S. Senate is less about one of his party's icons and more about his own life – as a veteran of the U.S. Navy and business executive – and a broadly centrist, business-friendly campaign message.

“The name's giving something, no doubt about it,” Kennedy said in a phone interview on Tuesday. “But it's the message. It's me being a different kind of candidate. It's me being a manifestation of the dream, working my way up from Prichard.”

A Raycom poll conducted last month showed Kennedy – who raised just over \$24,000 for the race through July 26 – with 49 percent of the Democratic vote, compared to 28 percent for former U.S. Attorney Doug Jones, who has won the endorsement of key Democratic politicians and organizations, including the Alabama Democratic Conference and U.S. Reps. Terri Sewell, D-Birmingham, and John Lewis, D-Ga.

Kennedy's standing has riled some Democrats, who see a better-than-average shot for the party to win the election if former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore – leading most polls – wins the Republican nomination and faces Jones. Kennedy, though, says he believes he's a more “exciting” candidate who can reach Republican and independent voters by being pro-gun rights (though he says he wants to crack down on illegal sales) and “fiscally responsible,” a phrase he used repeatedly in a 40-minute interview.

“There's a saying in the hip-hop community, real recognizes real,” he said. “They understand I'm saying what I believe.”

The candidate's beliefs fall in the mainstream of his party. Kennedy supports the Affordable Care Act, and says officials should look at issues with the law, including rising premiums in the state of Alabama. He calls single-payer health care – a goal shared by a growing number of candidates – “aspirational” and says Democrats need to do the work and “analyze the cost component” before proceeding.

Kennedy opposes new tariffs on goods – the problem, he says, is “not globalization, it's automation” – and said he would support new investments in infrastructure, like rural broadband, to reach out to economically depressed communities. On immigration, Kennedy says he supports a path to documentation for adults who came to the United States illegally, and a pathway to citizenship for the Dreamers – those brought to the United States by their parents as children. He also said he supports efforts to ensure businesses get the workers they need, whether in offices or on farms.

“We do not have open borders and we should not have open borders,” he said. “But when it comes to rural Alabama families, particularly farming families, they need a robust farm worker program that lets them take care of their businesses and take care of their families.”

Kennedy supports abortion rights, saying “we must ensure we as a society are there to support (the mother) in the prenatal phase and the postnatal phase as well” – and also supports same-sex marriage. The candidate also supports efforts to invest in clean energy sources like wind and solar to fight climate change.

If elected to the Senate, Kennedy said he would focus on legislation to improve government transparency and focus on constituent services, in particular ensuring people like veterans get access to the services they need.

Suggestions that his name alone will lead to victory, he said, are “disrespectful” to those who vote for him. Kennedy also suggested his election would serve as a sign to the world that Alabama had turned a corner.

“My mom graduated from high school in 1950 in the Jim Crow South,” he said. “When we looked at the promise of the dream, what people in 50s and 60s thought would happen, I am the example of what comes out at the other end.”

Name: Robert Kennedy Jr.

Age: 47

Party: Democratic

Residence: Prichard

Family: Married

Profession: Digital marketing executive for a laboratory supply company

Offices held/offices sought: First run for public office