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## Commentary

### Is Dan Patrick ready for higher things?

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AUSTIN BUREAU

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AUSTIN — Could Dan Patrick be Gov. Rick Perry's surprise pick for the U.S. Senate? If not, will Patrick run for the job? Would he run for governor as an independent if U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison wrests the GOP nomination from Perry?

In order: It would be a surprise. He's not ruling it out, but only if multiple Republicans run. And no.

The buzz that follows state Sen. Patrick, R-Houston, is a reminder of how far he's come since his bumpy 2007 freshman legislative year and points up the key role the conservative could play in the 2010 election.

"I don't want to see us move to the middle. ... That is political suicide for the Republican Party," Patrick said this summer's eve after a Perry event. Patrick still considers it a "life and death" battle, citing an unlikely figure to make his point.

"Ted Kennedy. I didn't agree with anything he stood for, but I respected the fact that he never wavered from his liberal point of view or principles to his dying day," Patrick said recently. "We need more Republicans who do not waver from their conservative principles to their dying day. Like Reagan."

For Patrick, whose influence is enhanced by his radio talk show on Houston's KSEV-AM (700), Perry fits the bill. But he said there's no truth to

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the odd idea that he may be an independent gubernatorial candidate if Hutchison gets the GOP nod.

Patrick, who has announced for re-election, has been mentioned as an outside-chance Perry pick for U.S. Senate, assuming Hutchison resigns. Patrick said he's not pounding down Perry's door, but, "Obviously, I would have an interest if the governor thought I was the most conservative and best candidate to serve."

If Perry goes with someone else, Patrick said, he won't run if the appointee is the only Republican in the race: "That would only guarantee a Democrat winning."

If a bigger field shapes up, he'll take a look.

Perry's appointee must have an "indisputable conservative track record," Patrick said, but he didn't want to comment on the current group of hopefuls.

That circumspection can be seen as a contrast to the Patrick who lit his colleagues' tempers in 2007 with what some saw as grandstanding — in February 2007, he borrowed \$1 million for a day and piled it on a table to make a point about spending — and rhetoric that sometimes ignored the Senate's clubby atmosphere.

The 2009 Patrick is seen as more of a team player — Texas Monthly writer Patricia Kilday Hart credited him in May with a new approach that included forging compromise — and has

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chalked up wins including a small-business tax break he sponsored with Democratic Rep. Rene Oliveira of Brownsville. Its passage was tied to higher taxes on discount smokeless tobacco.

“Dan Patrick has certainly grown into the job of being a Texas state senator,” said Southern Methodist University political scientist Cal Jillson. “Perry, I think, likes Patrick’s conservative imprimatur, but he’s not flirting with the lunatic fringe when he deals with Patrick. ... While I think it’s implausible to think of Dan Patrick for the U.S. Senate, he is a plausible Texas state senator and may well become accomplished in that role and be ready for the next level. But not today.”

Not that you’d say Patrick has softened. “I’m not planning to run for any higher office at this time. I really want to be the best Texas senator I can be,” he said, but added, “I see myself ready to fight for the cause. And if the governor decides he wants to call on me, I’m always ready for a good fight.”

As the Hutchison and Perry camps went back and forth over the community activist group ACORN, Perry spokesman Mark Miner bestowed another nickname on the foe he’s already dubbed Kay “Bailout” Hutchison: Sen. KAYCORN.

Hutchison spokesman Jeff Sadosky declined to match Miner nickname-for-nickname: “This is about Texas’ future, not about third-grade antics.”

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