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## Maine Is Focus of Senate Battle on Filibuster

Conservatives here have discovered a new patron saint this spring: Thomas Brackett Reed of Portland, a congressman from 1877 to 1889 who earned the nickname Czar Reed for helping abolish a type of filibuster practiced in the House.

Liberal groups, on the other hand, have found some new icons of their own: volunteers dressed as a six-foot-wide golden scale and a human-size checkmark who paraded around downtown on Thursday afternoon to convey the importance of the filibuster to the system of checks and balances.

As the Senate edges toward a showdown over judicial confirmations, a dozen national groups on both sides of the battle are turning a frantic onslaught of advertisements, phone campaigns, demonstrations, film screenings and petition drives on Maine's 1.3 million fiercely independent voters and its two potentially pivotal senators, Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe, both Republicans. With the possibility of a Supreme Court vacancy in the offing, the groups' efforts are turning this state into a chilly northern front in the national battle for public opinion about whether to change the Senate rules and which party should bear the blame for any fallout.

But in a state where "outsider" remains one of the most caustic terms in the political lexicon, both sides agree that most citizens have only a hazy idea of what the fuss is about.

In interviews with about two dozen Mainers in Portland, Augusta and their suburbs during this week's Senate recess, none had a clear understanding of the Senate procedure at the heart of the debate: the filibuster, a tactic that allows a minority of senators to stymie the chamber by standing against the 60 votes needed to close a debate. Republican leaders are threatening to change Senate rules by a majority vote to eliminate filibusters of judicial nominees, which would circumvent Democratic blockades of seven appeals court appointments. Some call what the Republicans propose "the nuclear option." Democrats vow to counter by tying the Senate in knots.

"It sort of buys time in the government," said Thom Sambrook, manager of Foley's Bakery in Scarborough, near Portland, making one of the better guesses at the meaning of "filibuster." "I'm close to being right, I think."

For their part, Maine's two Republican senators say the pressure campaigns - including some privately endorsed by Senator Bill Frist, the majority leader - are counterproductive, to say the least.

Dr. Frist, who is traveling in the Middle East, sent two private e-mail messages to Republican senators this week advising them that he intended to try changing the rule soon, according to Republican aides who were briefed on the messages. In one, he lauded the start of an advertising campaign in Maine and other

states by a group with close ties to the Bush campaign urging support for the rule change in Maine and other states. In the other, he applauded the placement of an opinion article in two newspapers, including one in Maine.

"I thought it was so strange that I got that e-mail," said Ms. Collins, noting that as one of a decisive handful of the 55 Republican senators who have not yet taken on a position on the rule change, she was a target of the advertising campaign her party leader had endorsed. Dr. Frist might have sent it only to those senators who had already agreed to support the idea, she said.

"I guess that says where Dr. Frist stands on the issue, that he is going to use every means possible to garner the votes that he needs to win," she said.

Ms. Snowe, who has indicated she intends to vote against the rule change, declined to comment on the e-mail messages from Dr. Frist. "It is a perpetual campaign," she said.

"It is regrettable that we can't carry on this debate in the Senate chamber among and between senators. We determine where the votes are and then we have no discussion; we have political ads," she added. "It ultimately ends up being very divisive."

A dozen national groups have filled the state's newspapers and airwaves with commercials for their side of the judicial confirmation battle, including Progress for America, the Judicial Confirmation Network, Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council on the right; and People for the American Way, MoveOn.org, the Alliance for Justice, and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and Earth Justice on the left.

"It certainly feels like a campaign season again, that is for sure," said Sarah Standiford, executive director of the Maine Women's Lobby, which leads an alliance of groups known as the Fair and Independent Federal Courts Coalition, which opposes the rules change.

In addition to urging calls or letters to Maine's two senators, the coalition collected signatures from lawyers, law students and professors on petitions and presented them to the senators' offices in the state. And it held a screening of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," which features a romanticized Senate filibuster, in Waterville to illustrate the tactic.

Conservatives, on the other hand, are building on their Bush campaign networks. Gary Marx, the Bush campaign's liaison to conservative groups and now executive director of the Judicial Confirmation Network, recruited Michael A. Duddy, a Portland lawyer, as the state spokesman. He invoked Thomas Brackett Reed from the annals of Maine history.

Reed "provides a uniquely historical Maine precedent for eliminating the filibuster of judicial nominees," Mr. Duddy wrote in an essay that was published in The Portland Press Herald this week.

"I want to appeal to that same sense of decency that Maine started," said Roy Lenardson, a Republican consultant working with Mr. Duddy, as he extolled Reed's legacy to people representing about two dozen conservative groups in a last-minute push Wednesday morning.

After the meeting, Bob Emrich, a Baptist pastor who doubles as the chief of staff to Republicans in the Statehouse, sent an e-mail message to about 6,000 Christian conservative Bush

campaign supporters who he said represent about 600 churches around the state. Urging more calls to the senators, he wrote that Mr. Bush's appointees were "very highly qualified people," and offered more information "if you are not familiar with the filibuster."

Ray Richardson, a statewide talk radio host, invokes Reed daily, exhorting his listeners to "call our lady senators" and "stop the madness" in the Senate.

Ms. Collins said that in her Maine office, "there were more calls coming in asking me to oppose than to support the rules change, but it was pretty even."

She said she believed she could be the deciding vote on the proposed rule change, and that she was keeping her position to herself to encourage both sides to compromise. But as she traveled around the state over this week's recess, she said, "Very few people have mentioned the fight about filibustered judges."