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Dodd's kitchen table ante is experience Senator says he knows how to be president

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Sen. Chris Dodd started out a "kitchen table" discussion with a dozen Democrats at a Center Conway home yesterday morning by praising the New Hampshire primary.

"I'm not as well-known as some of the other candidates," he said, "and you give me a chance."

Introducing himself as a "fellow New England Yankee," the silver-haired Connecticut senator touted his experience - 33 years in Congress - and history of across-the-aisle work with Republican senators like Orrin Hatch and Rick Santorum.

"I fully believe that while our problems are many, our capabilities are many, many more," Dodd, 62, told a lawn full of people later at a house party in Plymouth. "After six years of on-the-job training for George Bush, we want people who know how to do this."

The kitchen table discussion was supposed to be on energy policy, but participants quickly took the conversation to the Pentagon budget, health care and early childhood education. For his part, Dodd mused on American preparation for World War II, cited statistics on fast food contracts in public schools and joked about appearances on political talk shows ("The host said: 'We have 30 seconds, senator: The Middle East.'")

He told the group that he's publishing a book of letters his father, who as a "37-, 38-year-old kid" prosecuted Nazi war crimes at Nuremberg, wrote to his wife, Dodd's mother, from Germany. There were great love letters, too, he said. He paused: "There were six of us."

Pressed by a questioner who argued the Pentagon was overfunded, Dodd replied that the American military is currently overburdened and not war-ready.

"Military force is the last arrow you draw out of your quiver," he said.

Dodd has lagged in polls - he generally shows up beneath not only Sens. Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama and former senator John Edwards, but also former vice president Al Gore, who isn't a candidate - but his campaign has pushed hard in New Hampshire.

Yesterday, day three of a four-day tour of the state, he made five stops across the north of the state, starting with the klatch in Conway and ending up in at Dartmouth's Top of the Hop, a lofty study space on campus.

In policy terms, Dodd has carved out a distinct territory. Though he voted to authorize the war in 2002, Dodd now is the only presidential candidate to sign onto a senate bill that would withdraw troops from Iraq and cut off funding in March 2008.

In an energy policy he announced last week, Dodd has also gone further than most of the field. His energy plan calls for increasing fuel economy standards to 50 miles per gallon and creating a "corporate carbon tax," which he estimates will provide at least \$50 billion in annual revenue to be plowed into research for new kinds of energy.

Dodd said yesterday that the economists guess the taxes could translate to a 10-cents-per-gallon increase at the gas pump, but he argued that taxes are the only way to make energy reform happen.

"Otherwise, it's just talk," he said.

Dodd received enthusiastic applause and some big laughs at his stops yesterday, but several refrained from committing support.

"Good man - so was your dad," Ike Langendorfer told Dodd as he munched on cauliflower on the porch of a house party in Plymouth.

But Langendorfer, a physical education teacher at Newfound Regional Middle School, said he's not in the Dodd camp. He's from Cleveland, he said, and he's always liked Rep. Dennis Kucinich.

Fran DeFeo, who hosted the kitchen table talk in Center Conway yesterday, said he's from Connecticut and has followed Dodd for a long time. DeFeo said he likes Dodd's experience and background, but stopped short of putting himself in his camp.

"I think he's a viable candidate," DeFeo said.

The Plymouth house party was hosted by state Sen. Deb Reynolds, who told the crowd that she was grateful to Dodd for his support during her race last fall. Dodd campaigned with her in Lyme and called her on election night - before the results came in - to see how things were going. She hasn't endorsed anyone yet.

Dodd, whose campaign has been asking activists and legislators to at least hold off endorsing until they meet him, ended his kitchen table talk with a note of gratitude.

"I thank you for giving me a chance," he said.

State Rep. Tom Buco, who brought Dodd to a café in Conway for his first appearance of the day at 9:30, praised the senator's under-the-radar approach.

"This is a great strategy I think, even if it doesn't get a lot of glitzy TV," he said.

