Keep Your Eye on J. F. Smith, Key Supporter of Tom Dodd

Will J. Francis Smith of Waterbury, state Democratic chairman of pre-World War II days, emerge as the key man in a struggle for party power unrivaled since wartime days?

Many knowledgeable Democrats view this as a distinct possibility. Others believe that Smith, having satisfied his passionate determination to block Chester Bowles from a Senate seat, will now drop back to the sidelines.

Whatever Smith's own behind-the-scenes role in the future of U. S. Senate candidate Thomas J. Dodd, a very large number of Democrats throughout the state are convinced that the former congressman from West Hartford will, if he is elected, spell trouble for State Chmn. John M. Bailey and Gov. Ribicoff.

There is little doubt in the minds of Democrats of all factions that Dodd as a senator would begin to build his own organization within the organization. Dodd's strength within the party would be greatly increased if a Democratic President were elected two years hence. Then, as the state's only Democratic senator, he would have considerable influence over patronage—and patronage is still the thing that makes the wheels go round in any political organization.

The name of J. Francis Smith is especially significant in this regard.

In the late '30s, when Smith ascended to the top in state Democratic politics, he did so as the partner of Sen. Francis Maloney of Meriden.

If this would be a factor in gaining the support of Ribicoff and Bailey for their man.

From all indications, however, Ribicoff, Bailey and their closest intimates feared one thing more than a Dodd splinter organization—any threat that he would have lost his hold over the two men--that might eventually take control in the state. That, the evidence indicates, was a primary staged by Dodd and his rabid followers if the convention—which is to say, Ribicoff and Bailey—turned him down.

Bowles' long record of amenability, on strictly political matters, to the organization was a good tipoff that if he were the convention loser, he would not wage a primary.

This guess proved correct as the former Governor arose at the convention to assure the delegates that he would have no part of a primary.

It's possible, of course, that Bowles felt that in the stampede of delegates to switch to the winning nominee he and the other candidates would be left out like a primary. But many who have studied Bowles' relations with the organization over the years, and who felt he could have held onto the minimum of 178 delegates needed for a primary, were not surprised by his move.

Had not the former Governor appeared to be gaining considerable strength in the last few weeks before the convention, it is likely that old pro Smith would never have volunteered to take over Dodd's pre-convention and convention drive.

With the patronage he commanded as a strong New Deal senator at the height of the Roosevelt administration's power, plus the personal following he attracted there, the former Governor built up his own organization, which was often at odds with the state machine.

Until his death in early 1945, while he was still serving in the Senate, Maloney was easily one of the, if not the most powerful man in the Connecticut Democratic Party.

Almost everything in Tom Dodd's past indicates that he will be equally independent-minded.

Even as late as the Tuesday before the state convention, when he and the other candidates conferred with Ribicoff and when there is reason to believe Dodd knew he had the Senate nomination sealed, the former congressman firmly declared that he would wage a primary if the convention denied him the nomination.

So did Chester Bowles. Only the former Governor would pledge that he would stage no primary if the convention turned him down.

But Bowles, unlike Dodd, had a long history of close co-operation with the powers-that-be in the state Democratic Party. So did Benton.

Everything in Dodd's record pointed in the opposite direction. Most recently, he had publicly scolded the state machine for not giving him the right kind of support in his unsuccessful Senate bid of 1956.

Bailey bristled at this and other expressions of Dodd's feelings toward the organization but said nothing publicly. Neither did Ribicoff.

The strained relations between Dodd and the two top leaders were an open secret among the convention delegates. Some Bowles supporters felt this would

His eagerness to work for Dodd stemmed largely from deep animosity toward Bowles and many of the things the former Governor stands for.

A nominal New Dealer when the New Deal was in its heyday, Smith has long been identified as an outspoken conservative—more so than such Republicans as Sen. William Proctor and most members of the state's GOP Congressional delegation.

One of the most clear-cut demonstrations of Smith's ideology came in 1946, when the former state chairman, a prosperous lumber dealer, made speech after speech assailing the Office of Price Administration.

While Democrats in Washington were fighting to keep CPA alive Smith lashed out repeatedly at "ideological profiteers" whom he blamed for lumber shortages, among other post-war troubles.

While he mentioned no "ideological profiteers" by name, the hatred of the CPA and the outstanding symbol of the consumer protection it stood for was Chester Bowles.

Twelve years later, when Smith heard reports that Bowles was making substantial inroads in the senatorial contest, the Waterbury man's animosity was reawakened.

Some observers felt that it was less to see Dodd elected than to see Bowles defeated that Smith entered the Senate fray.

With the Senate nomination sealed, and with the expectation that his relations with the party's high command may be formally cordial but never really harmonious, Dodd might find the services of a veteran campaigner like Smith extremely useful.

It could be, on the other hand, that Smith will quickly fade out of the picture. The former is more likely to be true.

The role of J. Francis Smith could be one of the most interesting behind-the-scenes developments of the 1958 campaign.