

9-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Duquette, Jerold J. (2010) "True Blue Mass 2010," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol5/iss1/6>

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True Blue Mass 2010

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The 2010 elections in Massachusetts signaled a surprising “return to normalcy” in a state that less than one year ago was the epicenter of a conservative wave that would sweep across much of the country in the 2010 elections. How did the home of the “Scott heard round the world” avoid entirely an electoral tidal wave that got one of its most potent boosts right here in Massachusetts?

The failure of Republicans (Tea Party backed and otherwise) to win even one statewide or congressional election in the Bay State in 2010 bears powerful witness the wisdom of that most familiar political proverb, “all politics is local.” The more precise explanation involves the misinterpretation of Scott Brown’s victory in the special election to fill Senator Ted Kennedy’s vacated seat, and in the failure of Massachusetts Republicans to properly exploit the real opportunities that Brown’s election created for their party’s electoral fortunes in the state.

The timing of Brown’s special election, the so-called “enthusiasm gap,” and the massive injection of human and financial resources from Tea Partiers and conservative donors nationally made Brown’s historic political victory a very bad model, or test case if you will, for Massachusetts’ Republican 2010 campaigns. Instead of representing a light at the end of the tunnel for Massachusetts Republicans, Brown’s Cinderella story may have served only to inspire false confidence and misplaced convictions among the state’s 2010 Republican contenders, who just didn’t seem to realize that the clock struck midnight well before the November elections.

Scott Brown’s Election

Scott Brown was a fairly low key Republican state senator prior to his entry into the race for Senator Kennedy's vacated U.S. Senate seat. The Massachusetts special election that took place on January 19, 2010 was indeed "special" in that it was not for a whole term of office and it was the culmination of what may be the most nationally watched and nationally participated in US Senate election in history.

Before Christmas, 2009, there were few hints that Brown would be any more than the Republican sacrificial lamb the state's GOP expected him to be. But what most voters, media outlets, and apparently the Martha Coakley campaign, didn't realize in the waning days of 2009 was that Brown's campaign had, in effect, been adopted by Tea Party activists from around the nation. Tea Partiers hoped that a political victory for their anti-government cause, in the state from which they got their name, would be a game changer nationally, both in terms of 2010 electoral politics and in terms of their Herculean efforts to derail President Obama's health insurance reform bill. Scott Brown's election, it was hoped, would have both symbolic and direct practical value to the Tea Party, both to their broad ideological goals and to their precise policy goals. A Republican replacement for the liberal lion of the US Senate would show the country that small government, anti-Obama sentiments are real and deep in America. The fact that Brown would be the 41st vote to sustain Senate Republican filibusters of all President Obama's major initiatives made the race just too tempting to ignore for Tea Partiers, a bunch not chastened by "conventional wisdom" like the more experienced conservative political establishment.

So, despite lukewarm support from the Massachusetts Republicans, and similarly feckless support from the RNC and establishment Republican leaders nationally, Tea Party activists made Brown's campaign their own and provided the manpower and eventually the money to catch the

state's Democrats napping. The rude awakening began less than two weeks before Election Day, when some polls came out suggesting that Brown was not only viable, but was winning the race. The first such poll was published on January 9, 2010 and had Brown beating his Democratic opponent by a single percentage point.¹ During the two or three weeks prior to that first poll giving Brown the lead, the state's Democratic wise men and political analysts generally (including me) were content to point out methodological problems with the polls and to assume that enough of the conventional voter turnout expectations in a special election would rule the day.

We were wrong because we did not consider the capacity of a highly energized and media savvy Tea Party organization to get out the vote for Scott Brown. We failed to consider that potential for the increased effectiveness of high tech "get out the vote" tactics on a state-level but with the exclusive attention and intervention of conservative activists from across the nation. The "experts" and the Coakley campaign thought it was a typical state election and that anything "special" about its timing was likely to increase, not decrease the Democratic advantages. The institutional factors, such as the expected low turnout in special elections, and historical factors, such as the modern Democratic lock on US House and Senate seats in Massachusetts even in years when Bay State voters had sent Republicans to the Governor's office, contributed to Democratic complacency and overconfidence. By the time Brown's polling advantage had surpassed the margins of error, it was too late for the slumbering Democratic establishment to regain control of the narrative or to stem Brown's momentum.

As the polling continued to move Brown's way, the Tea Party and Brown campaign endeavored to make January 19th a coming out party for all Massachusetts' conservatives and alienated

outsiders, who would strike a blow for common sense and conservative values against the state's arrogant liberal establishment, which had belittled and ignored them for decades.

In the end, Brown victory had little to do with public policy or ideological purity. It was really just a fantastic and unprecedented opportunity- that quickly jelled and became realistic- for frustrated Massachusetts voters of all political stripes to punch the proverbial "Man" right in the nose. Conservatives got a chance to experience the kind of hope they watched liberals experience in 2008. Alienated independents got an opportunity to show that they mattered when it counts. And, dispirited progressives, in the wake of what they saw as President Obama's excessive compromising with the Republicans, could easily justify their failure to show up on Election Day as an expression of policy purity and fidelity to progressive principles. Also, for the policy-focused progressives on the far left in Massachusetts, the sudden opportunity to stick it to establishment Democrats in the state, with whom they have always had a strained relationship, was a bonus.

One possibly poetic element to this story is that fact that the only reason there was a special election for Senator Kennedy's seat is that the State's Democratic legislature changed the law regarding the replacement of US Senators whose terms were not yet expired. In order to protect Massachusetts from the specter of a Republican US Senator in the event of a John Kerry victory in the 2004 presidential election, the state legislature took away the (then Republican) governor's power to fill vacancies in the US Senate. There was an effort to restore the (now Democratic) governor's power to fill US Senate vacancies prior to Senator Kennedy's death, but the blatant partisanship of such a move compelled enough Democratic lawmakers to balk.

The Massachusetts Republicans' Missed Opportunity of 2010

Brown's Cinderella story appeared to have it's hoped for symbolic impact on the national political debate for a time during Senator Brown's first few months in office. Unfortunately for Massachusetts Republicans hoping to exploit the situation in order to recapture the state's corner office and increase their party's share of state legislative seats, the Tea Party bloom was coming off the rose of the affable young Republican Senator who campaigned across the state in a pickup truck.

Brown was no doubt thankful for the efforts of the Tea Party that pushed him over the finish line, but he also came to understand fairly quickly that his re-election could not be secured, and indeed would likely be imperiled, if he carried too much water for the far right in the Senate. In 2012, Brown knows he will not have a monopoly on the national spotlight, the luxury of a complacent Democratic establishment, or a sufficiently dispirited progressive left. Nor will he have the kind of dedicated manpower by committed movement ideologues from across the country to help him get reelected. As of this writing in January 2011, there is actually quite a bit of buyer's remorse among Tea Party sympathizers in Massachusetts who supported Brown. There is even talk about primary challenges to Brown.

Republican campaigns for Congress, the governor's office, other statewide executive offices, and even state legislative seats were conducted largely as if the Conservative enthusiasm and momentum impact of Brown's election on January 20, 2010 was canned, frozen, and reopened on Labor-day as fodder for use in the November elections of 2010. The campaigns of Republican gubernatorial candidate Charlie Baker, and US House candidates Tom Wesley and Sean Bielat, exemplify the Republican candidates' unwillingness, or inability, to account for the political and cultural peculiarities of Massachusetts politics, or to acknowledge the vastly

different terrain of a November election. They may have simply assumed that post-Brown, all conventional wisdom could be thrown out the window.

The highest profile Republican Congressional candidate was Sean Bielet, who was taking on the very powerful and very well known Barney Frank, in what Republicans expected could be another important symbolic victory in the heart of true blue Massachusetts. Like Brown, Beilet received lots of national attention and national money. He also had a small band of Tea Party activists ready to replicate their “get out the vote” successes of the previous January. But, of course, he did not have a slumbering opponent or any significant barriers the usual high turnout in gubernatorial election years.

Down the turnpike, Democratic US Representative Richie Neal also had a Republican opponent of the Tea Party variety, though without much out of state Tea Party money or manpower. But that didn't deter Businessman Tom Wesley from running an aggressive anti-Washington, anti-establishment, anti-tax, pro-business campaign in which a small but hardy band of “Momma Grizzlies” and assorted right wing local media personalities, bloggers, and personal enemies of the congressman, spent the late summer and fall pretending Rep. Neal was Boss Tweed and that Western Mass voters were indistinguishable politically and culturally from Alabama voters. In other words, they made no effort to square their policy preferences or even their rhetoric to the preferences or values of their target voters.

Wesley's campaign was aggressively conservative on the full array of domestic issues and obnoxiously anti-Democratic Party in an electorate that is majority liberal on broad policy questions and in which Democratic voters significantly outnumber Republican voters. Once again, the euphoria of Brown's victory seems to have been badly misinterpreted as a truly

comprehensive “game changer” in Massachusetts politics. To put it in broader, more categorical terms, these Republican campaigns failed to adjust their efforts to the particular cultural individualism that dominates Massachusetts politics, to say nothing of the conventional Democratic advantages afforded by high turnout and a long ballot.

Massachusetts voters are certainly committed to individualism and no more tolerant of arbitrary government power than the next guy, but they do not share the Tea Party’s moral disdain for politics and politicians. Indeed, Massachusetts voters tend to see “professionalism” in politics as either a plus or as insignificant. Though a meeting of Sarah Palin enthusiasts in Western Mass could be conducted in a phone booth, the Wesley campaign was undaunted by the makeup of its target audience, confident that they could win converts using the same highly moralistic, anti-politician, anti-Obama rhetoric that was polling so well in national surveys.

How could Massachusetts Republicans so over-estimate the viability of anti-Obama and anti-big government rhetoric in a state that has expressed its conservatism by electing Republican governors like Bill Weld and Mitt Romney, neither of whom fit in well with the Fox News wing of the Republican Party? How did 2010 Republican gubernatorial candidate Charlie Baker lose to incumbent governor Deval Patrick, whose poll numbers had been anemic and whose 2010 political obituary had been written long before Scott Brown’s election? The short answer to the latter question is that Baker took two things for granted that he should not have: First, he assumed that the Massachusetts economy was in terrible shape and was showing no signs of recovery; and second, he assumed voters blamed Patrick for the state’s economic woes and were eager to send him packing.

Patrick, for his part, maintained a patient, calm, and workmanlike approach to his office throughout his first term, quietly taking on both liberal and conservative sacred cows in an effort to stabilize the state's economy and program effectiveness. Charlie Baker's campaign rhetoric carelessly ignored Patrick's less glamorous accomplishments like pension reform and administrative consolidation as well as some of his most savvy political and managerial plays, such as taking on police and teachers unions and supporting casinos in the face of very strident progressive opposition. Instead, Charlie Baker just put up ads about the awful economy and accused Patrick of raising taxes and destroying the business climate in the state. The almost weekly news reports about how Massachusetts was fairing much better than most other states economically were virtually ignored by Baker, who instead took to wearing jeans and work boots to public events. His efforts to out Brown Senator Brown in the "regular guy" category proved far less believable for the billionaire former CEO of Harvard-Pilgrim Health Insurance Company. Even the endorsement and frequent photo ops with Senator Brown were less valuable than they were thought to be as the new Senator's voting record veered left too often for many Tea Partiers comfort.

At the end of the day, Bay State Republicans forgot that "all politics is local" and they made the mistake of believing their own rhetorical exaggerations. The Republican wave of 2010 in the US Congress was powered by symbolism and strongly held abstract values sufficient to impact federal elections in the short run, though probably not the long run. Political movements like the Tea Party can impact federal politics because of the relative salience of ideological claims at the federal level. In the states, however, the strength and resilience of entrenched political power is fortified by a close fit between the interests and policy preferences of the major political players and the state's political culture. The malleability of political values and conventions at the

federal level is greater than at the state level because of greater cultural plurality and higher political and policy stakes. When it comes to the values and motivations of state-level voters, it's always a mistake to rely too much on national public opinion data, or to discount too much the impact of regional and local political culture on voter behavior.

So despite the wisdom of seeing states as important “laboratories of democracy,” a concept more valuable in the arena of policy formulation and administration than in the electoral arena, it remains virtually a law of political physics, at least in Massachusetts, that you cannot easily nationalize state and local elections even when the most salient issue, like economic recession, is acknowledged to be central to both the state and nation. Furthermore, the 2010 Massachusetts elections suggests that you can never ignore the impact of state-level political culture, which is both more important and more resilient than the average national public opinion polls would have us believe.

ⁱ http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/PPP_Release_MA_45398436.pdf