

3-1-2013

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Jerold J. Duquette

Central Connecticut State University

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Recommended Citation

Duquette, Jerold J. (2013) "The 'Scott Brown Era' In Massachusetts Politics," *New England Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/nejps/vol7/iss1/7>

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The “Scott Brown Era” In Massachusetts Politics

Jerold J. Duquette
Central Connecticut State University

The “special” election of Republican Scott Brown to Ted Kennedy’s vacated US Senate seat in January, 2010 sent shock waves through the American political universe. How could the Democrats lose this safest of safe US Senate seats? Was Brown the vanguard of a Republican revival in Massachusetts? Was this pickup truck driving, state senate back bencher a political diamond in the rough whose charisma and common touch would enable him (or someone like him) to hold on to this Senate seat for the long haul? No. And, no.

Amazingly, it wasn’t until February of 2013, when every seemingly viable Republican in Massachusetts, including Brown, had chosen not to run for John Kerry’s vacated US Senate seat in yet another “special” election that the political press and punditocracy began consider the possibility that the “Scott Brown Era” in Massachusetts politics amounted to little more than a blip on the radar screen. What will it take for the state’s politicians and talking heads to recognize that Brown’s election was an anomaly produced by unusual circumstances that we are very unlikely to see repeated anytime soon?

A confluence of unusual, indeed unprecedented, circumstances in late 2009 and early 2010 altered the dynamics of the Massachusetts U.S. Senate election that sent Scott Brown to Washington. The irregular timing of the race, occurring all alone on the national stage, made it a front line national partisan battleground in the partisan war over President Obama’s legislative agenda, particularly the healthcare reform bill then winding its way through Congress. The race coincided with a particularly unfortunate period for Democrats in the arc of President Obama’s first term. His overall popularity was low, his opponents were energized by the activism of the

not yet disastrously counter-productive Tea Party wing of the Republican Party, and Obama's own political base was discouraged and disappointed with his failure to more forcefully support and defend his progressive agenda. For example, the President's refusal to expend any noticeable political capital in the defense of the so-called "public option" provision of his health insurance reform bill was a source of particularly bitter disappointment among loyal Democrats and progressives in Massachusetts.

The nomination of Gabriel Gomez, a self-styled "new kind of Republican," in the Republican primary contest to fill John Kerry's vacated U.S. Senate seat, however, will undoubtedly delay a more fulsome appreciation of the duration and significance of the "Scott Brown Era" in the minds of many Bay State Republicans, as well as many of the state's political prognosticators and media analysts. Brown owed his 2010 "special" election victory to forces well outside his (or his opponent's) control. Neither his upset victory in 2010, nor his ignominious defeat in 2012 were about him, his opponents (Coakley and Warren), or a genuine shift in the partisan hue of the Bay State's electorate. The chattering class will, no doubt, use Gomez's nomination as a pretext for suspending disbelief and as justification for all manner of horse race hype in the coming "battle" between Ed Markey and Gabriel Gomez. Barring the unforeseeable, however, Gabriel Gomez's general "special" election campaign for the U.S. Senate will very likely serve as another example of the primacy of context over campaigns in determining winners and losers on Election Day in Massachusetts U.S. Senate elections.

The 2010 Special Election Was About the Context, Not the Candidates

Brown's upset victory over Democratic State Attorney-General Martha Coakley was not a sign that the Massachusetts Democratic Party was losing support among voters or evidence of an

electorate turning purple. Nor was Brown's personal political prowess, which was elevated to near mythical status after his election, the difference in the 2010 special election. The "Wednesday morning quarterbacks" also got it wrong when they tried to hang the blame for the outcome on the Democratic nominee herself. Martha Coakley's campaign was not great, but it also was not inept or unlucky enough to have lost that election under "normal conditions." If Ed Markey, a man not known for his charisma or sparkling oratory on the stump, defeats Republican Gabriel Gomez in the June 25th special election, will the folks who landed so hard on Martha Coakley in the aftermath of her loss in 2010 realize the error of their ways? I doubt it.

The explanation for Brown's election is really quite simple, which only adds to the embarrassment of everyone who failed to see it coming. The "fundamentals" of the 2010 special election gave the Republican candidate in that race a number of distinct advantages that when added up and considered dispassionately, made the outcome of that contest imminently predictable. The failure of the press, pols, pundits, and pollsters to see it coming until the last week or two of the race may be at least partially explained by the unprecedented configuration of these "fundamental" dynamics.

Everyone assumed that the Democratic candidate would win because that's what had always happened in modern US Senate contests in Massachusetts. Until very late in the game, nothing in the polls hinted of a surprise on Election Day in January, 2010. Everyone assumed that the race changed down the stretch; that Brown's campaign hit its stride and Coakley's ran out of gas. In other words, the popular metaphor of a "horse race" continued to frame the analysis, even long after Election Day. What political scientists call the "fundamentals" of the race, however, told a very different story.

The fundamentals of a Massachusetts U.S. Senate special election include factors like the tenor of the national political narrative at the time of the contest; the composition of the electorate in terms of party registration; the actual or de facto existence of an incumbency advantage in the race. In 2010, the Democratic Party's three-to-one registration advantage and the commitment of the Democratic Party establishment, both among party leaders and elected officials (which arguably gave Coakley many of the advantages usually associated with incumbency), certainly made it easier to put the blame on Coakley and give the credit to Brown. However, what went largely unnoticed in the post-game analysis was that the timing of the Brown-Coakley election, both in terms of the dates on the calendar and the state of the ongoing national political narrative, was highly advantageous to the Republican nominee and disadvantageous to the Democratic candidate, regardless of how well either performed on the stump.

Brown's campaign became the focus of Tea Party efforts to stop Barack Obama in his tracks. The steady and increasing energy and enthusiasm of Tea Partiers from across the nation for electing Scott Brown as the 41st Republican in the Senate, which would give the Republicans enough votes to filibuster Obamacare, didn't seem to worry many Massachusetts Democrats, who assumed that such extremist support would turn out to be a drag, not a boost, to Brown's campaign in Massachusetts. Interestingly, the campaign of the 2013 Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in the Bay State, Gabriel Gomez, will very likely be hindered if the state's Tea Party wing of the Republican Party is too conspicuously behind him during the campaign. In hind sight, the election of Scott Brown may well have been the high water mark for the Tea Party's efforts to help the national Republican Party. They showed the RNC the way in the Brown-Coakley contest. They showed Republicans that energizing the base was the key to victory when the political narrative is favorable. The human and financial capital drawn to the 2010 race from

around the nation eventually helped create “buy in” from the folks at the RNC (Republican National Committee). In a normal election cycle, the RNC would have been far less likely to augment the efforts of a fringe group like the Tea Party in one of the bluest states in the union. The fundamental dynamics of the Brown-Coakley race, however, proved both irregular and unprecedented. Because the race was happening all alone on the national stage, the RNC was able to devote time and resources to it without compromising operations in other races. The opportunity costs were unusually low, while the potential institutional payoff was enormous. Scott Brown would be the crucial 41st Republican vote in the US Senate after all.

In addition to a favorable cost-benefit calculation for the Republican Party, the state of the national political narrative was quite friendly for Republicans in general. Even in bright blue Massachusetts the polls showed a clear lack of enthusiasm for President Obama’s performance in office. The most high profile issue in Washington at the time was the President’s healthcare reform bill and even in the Bay State “Obamacare” was not polling well. The prognosticators didn’t sufficiently factor in the national political mood, the national staging of the race, or the possibility that it could contribute to enough of an increase in conservative/ Republican enthusiasm and a decline in liberal/ Democratic enthusiasm to make a difference on Election Day. Until the final weeks of the race, Democrats took comfort in the polls and in the assumption that the state’s progressives and loyal partisans would provide enough of a turnout cushion in what was expected to be a very low turnout election to offset any increased turnout generating by the conservative enthusiasm of the moment.

The disaffection of progressive voters and politically moderate Obama supporters from 2008, however, seems to have flown well under the radar of the state Democratic Party and the Coakley campaign. The idea that President Obama’s perceived failures to fight for progressive

policy priorities would depress Democratic turnout on Election Day wasn't taken very seriously. For decades, the Democratic establishment had been able to take its progressive wing for granted in elections with high partisan stakes. The choice of Coakley as the nominee, instead of a more progressive candidate, reflects the failure of the Massachusetts Democratic Party at the time to appreciate the nature and import of the national political climate. By the time the polls began to register the impact of the national political mood in the final weeks of the campaign, the die was cast.

Bay State Democrats were caught sleeping because they failed to consider how "special" the dynamics of that special election really were. They over-estimated the partisan loyalties of the state's progressive voters, expecting them to be eager to defend Obama against the Republicans, especially with Brown as the potential roadblock to the passage of healthcare reform. The reality was that many Bay State progressives sat on their hands during the 2010 race in part because of their own opposition to the President's healthcare bill, which for them was an example of the President's willingness to sacrifice progressive values and policy goals in exchange for Republican support. While Martha Coakley was no darling of the state's progressive community, the failure of progressives to energetically support her was about the President and his perceived performance, not about Coakley's. At the end of the day, the 2010 special election was a referendum on the President's performance for the most attentive elements of the electorate on the right and the left (i.e. the most likely to turnout), and the verdict was negative on both ends of the ideological spectrum. Opposition to Obama's healthcare reform bill on both the right and the left contributed to Scott Brown's upset victory.

Many Bay State Progressives' decisions to register their disappointment with President Obama's performance by essentially sitting out the 2010 race was made easier by the longstanding

marginalization of Bay State progressives' concerns and interests by the state's Democratic Party establishment. It also probably seemed like a safe protest to some because; 1) they really didn't like the healthcare bill in its present state much anyway, and 2) they likely assumed that their lack of active support would merely reduce Coackley's margin of victory. It is arguable, that Brown's election actually ended up serving the interests of Bay State Progressives much more effectively than a Coackley victory would have. In 2012, the State's Democratic establishment very quickly anointed a candidate who enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the progressive wing of the party, who went on to an easy victory in November. And, in 2013, the strength of the unity between establishment Democrats and progressive activists contributed to an easy victory for Ed Markey, a congressman with very close ties to the state's progressive community, in the special U.S. Senate Democratic primary race.

Is there anything that Martha Coakley could have done to rally progressives and to recognize the degree to which the race was really about national partisan politics, rather than about her or Scott Brown? Probably not, though if enough folks in the Massachusetts Democratic Party had recognized how much the race would turn on national political issues, they might have chosen a different nominee. Had liberal Congressman Mike Capuano been able to get past Coakley in the Democratic primary, his progressive politics and his perch in the US House of Representatives may have helped the party frame the race more appropriately, which is to say, as an important battle in the bitterly polarized partisan politics of Washington.

The 2012 US Senate Race: Who Learned the Lessons of 2010?

Despite the results of the 2010 midterm elections in Massachusetts, just ten months after Brown's election, in which the Democrats swept every statewide and congressional race, the

conventional wisdom in the run up to the 2012 election among many who think about elections for a living was that Brown would be hard to beat in his effort to earn a full six-year term in the US Senate. This was complete nonsense of course, but it did provide the chattering class with an opportunity for contrition and redemption over their blown calls of the 2010 special election. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that most election prognosticators in the Bay State were gun shy, afraid to be burned a second time by Scott Brown.

In truth, Brown's chances of winning a full six year term in 2012 started at "slim" and moved to virtually "none" when the state's normally fractious Democratic Party coalesced very early around Elizabeth Warren without even a primary contest. When I predicted a "comfortable" Warren victory margin a full ten months prior to Election Day I was all alone out on that limb, while virtually everyone else nervously reminded readers and viewers of the "intangibles" of elections and the power of "game changing" campaign performances. If I had a nickel for every pundit who cautioned against underestimating Scott Brown and who revived the "all politics is local" aphorism in their election analysis, I would indeed be a wealthy man.

The idea was that Brown's mythical personal political skills, voters' disgust with partisan gridlock and extremism, and the perceived advantages of Brown's senate incumbency would be enough to make the race a nail bitter. That Brown's political prowess was thought to be so formidable by those we assume know the most about elections, despite his inability to help any of his party's nominees in the 2010 midterms and the dramatically more favorable national political narrative for Democrats in 2012, is curious, to say the least. At one level, it appears that many of those who traffic in the conduct and analysis of elections as "horse races" believe that the candidate-centered narrative they feed to the general public is actually the true tale of the tape

in elections. It's not. Every one of the high profile Democrats who "played it safe" by choosing to side step a run in 2012 would have beaten Brown in the 2012 race.

To be fair, there is a lot of political science research supporting the notion of candidate-centric elections. However, a closer look at this research reveals that while campaigns became increasingly "candidate-centered" over the last half century or so, the actual decisions of voters in the voting booth have been and remain "party-centric." The polarization of partisan politics in Washington, contrary to popular belief, actually appears to have increased the partisanship of voters, though this hasn't stopped lots of candidates and campaigns from pursuing the mythical "swing" voters, who are thought to be a fertile, untapped reservoir of folks who disdain both parties and long to cast their vote for moderation and bipartisanship. These voters were clearly the target audience for Scott Brown in 2012 and will just as clearly be the target audience for Gabriel Gomez's campaign in 2013.

The Advantages of Incumbency

What made anyone think that Scott Brown's less-than-half term incumbency gave him a significant edge? The power of incumbency, for many, is just a statistical reality. The correlation between Senate incumbency and winning is very high. However, if more of the polls, pundits, and pollsters were willing to take a closer look at the research on incumbency, they would have quickly realized that Scott Brown's incumbency was "special," just like his upset victory in 2010, and not in a good way. With less than three years on the job, what particular benefits of incumbency had Brown earned? Had Senator Brown used his influence to build a powerful political infrastructure in the state? Had he developed close, mutually beneficial relationships with state and local officials? Did he become close enough to the state's senior Senator and its

House delegation to have earned some political goodwill from these colleagues despite their membership in the Democratic Party?

Long story short, Brown had earned almost none of the tangible benefits that make incumbent senators very hard to beat. He did have impressive fund raising potential, though even this was uncertain in the run up to 2012 because while in office he managed to alienate the Tea Party wing of his party, his most energetic and enthusiastic supporters in the 2010 race, by proving to be a particular species of Republican known as a “Massachusetts Republican.” Needless to say, Tea Partiers would be happy to see this type of Republican on the endangered species list. It may be interesting to compare the Tea Party enthusiasm in 2010, a very important element of Brown’s win, with that of 2013. What role will the Republican Party’s far right wing play in the Markey/Gomez race?

Early on in the 2012 campaign, the perception of incumbency strength did produce what looked at the time like a tangible benefit for Brown. It did seem to play a role in scaring off the number of high profile and experienced potential opponents, leaving the Democrats with a field of less high profile and much less experienced candidates. It appeared that the Democrats would have to settle for a B-list candidate willing to buck the odds and unafraid of what a loss would mean for his or her future career aspirations, a predicament with which, as it happens, Bay State Republicans were all too familiar. Ending up with first-time candidate and Harvard Law professor Elizabeth Warren looked to many like solid evidence of the power of incumbency to scare off serious competition.

Like Brown in 2010, Elizabeth Warren was in the right place at the right time to be a strong candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2012. Because she was not a career politician, she did not have a

political future to worry about. Because she had spent the last couple of years in the national spot light fighting for the reform of Wall Street and the creation of a federal consumer protection agency, Warren probably had as much experience with both the national media and the U.S. Senate as Scott Brown in 2012. She was a frequent guest on the Sunday morning political talk shows, as well as the very popular “Daily Show” hosted by John Stewart on cable TV’s Comedy Network. She tangled with combative Republican Senators in a number of hearings on Capitol Hill, which ultimately contributed to President Obama’s withdrawal of her nomination to head the new consumer protection agency she herself had designed and championed.

Warren’s national stature, along with the very high partisan stakes of the 2012 race for the Democrats nationally, made it relatively easy for her campaign to raise huge sums of money, despite her status as a first time candidate for high office. Her fundraising potential was clear so quickly that Brown’s campaign agreed to what became known as “the People’s Pledge,” which was an agreement by both candidates to discourage outside groups from engaging in independently financed media campaigns in support of either candidate. They made the pledge stick by agreeing to donate from their campaign coffers the estimated cost of any outside group expenditures intended to benefit their campaigns. The question of which candidate benefitted more from the de fact ban on independent expenditures by so-called “super” PACs in the 2012 race remains largely unresolved.

Though she was not the incumbent, Warren’s unusually high profile for a first time candidate contributed to her campaign’s ability to assume the posture and perspective of an incumbent in the race against Brown. Unlike the actual incumbent, Warren had the endorsements as well as the political resources and infrastructure of every member of the state’s congressional delegation and the endorsement and tangible support of every statewide elected official from the governor

on down. Also, like Brown in 2010, Warren's election was seen as a "must win" race her party nationally, earning her a level of national support unusual for a Senate challenger and unheard of for a first time candidate. The Massachusetts Democratic State Committee's "coordinated campaign" in 2012 made the Warren campaign its primary focus, knowing that the rest of the Democratic field would be swept up in President Obama's (and even Elizabeth Warren's) coattails in the state. As it turned out, even House Democrat, John Tierney, thought to be vulnerable due to personal issues and a strong challenger, was re-elected comfortably.

What no one seemed willing or able to admit, right up to the time on Election Night when the race was called for Warren, was that the quality of the Democratic nominee's performance on the campaign trail was not particularly important to the outcome of the 2012 election because the larger political and institutional context of the race presented Brown with a very steep mountain to climb, regardless of the quality of his Democratic opponent. On the day he lost the election by eight points to Elizabeth Warren, Brown enjoyed a 60% approval rating in public opinion polls.

In reality, Brown's incumbency advantage was a mirage. Unable to parlay his incumbency into a statewide network of useful political alliances and endorsements, Senator Brown's campaign was forced to rely on big name Republicans from other states (which directly undercut his effort to localize the contest) and a motley crew of state and local officials, whose endorsements came without the political infrastructure and resources that normally constitute the primary value of endorsements in the first place. Because his only route to victory would require almost a quarter of a million Bay State voters to "split their tickets" by voting for Brown AND President Obama, Brown invested a great deal of time and energy in courting "Democrats for Brown," a group of mostly former office holders whose endorsements Brown hoped would encourage ticket splitting.

The highest profile “Democrats for Brown” that actually lived in Massachusetts were folks like former Boston Mayor Ray Flynn, whose support was hardly a coup considering that he had publicly supported George W. Bush and had long since surrendered his influence among reliably Democratic voters and/or activists. Flynn had become a high profile opponent of abortion rights. His support of the nominally pro-choice Brown, which was transparently motivated by his desire to see Republicans take control of the Senate, actually played right into the narrative that made Brown’s prospects so dim, namely, that the race was about national politics and partisan control of the US Senate, which, of course, was a central theme of Elizabeth Warren’s campaign. Brown’s success depended in large part on his ability to separate himself from the national political narrative in general and from his party’s obstructionist tactics in Washington specifically. His endorsements strategy did nothing to further those essential goals.

Republicans and the “Ticket-Splitting” Gambit

The Republicans belief in the possibility of generating enough “ticket-splitting” for Brown to overcome the numerous advantages of his Democratic opponent was doomed from the start. Nonetheless, the Brown campaign even made overt efforts to convince voters that he had and would “work well” with President Obama and thereby provide leadership out of the bitter partisan quagmire then thought to be engulfing Washington, D.C. Brown avoided association with his party’s presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, like the former governor had a highly contagious disease, and even aired a TV commercial showing President Obama shaking his hand and saying “good work” after signing a bill viewers were supposed to believe Senator Brown had authored.

The perceived utility of the ticket-splitting strategy hinged on the fact that Bay State voters had shown a willingness to elect Republican governors in the recent past, while simultaneously electing huge Democratic state legislative majorities. This was taken as a sign that with the right candidate and campaign message a Republican could win statewide elections in Massachusetts. Republicans hoped Brown could harness the energy of the state's "unenrolled" voters, who constituted 52% of registered voters, by exploiting their disgust with partisan bickering and insider politics "as usual" and by arguing that his would be an "independent" voice (a check overzealous partisanship, if you will) in the U.S. Senate.

The flaw in this ticket-splitting approach centers on a misunderstanding of the differences between the fundamental dynamics of gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections in the Bay State. Every Republican elected to the state's corner office in the recent past benefitted from the notion that having a Republican governor would either place a useful check on the entrenched Democratic majorities in the state legislature, or (largely because of those entrenched and veto-proof Democratic majorities) have no deleterious impact on Democratic control of Beacon Hill. In other words, the partisan stakes in Massachusetts gubernatorial elections were (and are) much lower than the partisan stakes in U.S. Senate elections. Depending on moderate, disaffected voters is a plausible approach for Republican gubernatorial candidates in the state, but not for Republican U.S. Senate candidates, thanks to the indisputably partisan context of the Washington politics today.

"There are only two ways for a Good Candidate to Campaign; Scared or Unopposed"

During the spring and summer of 2012 the political media was focused on the campaign of Elizabeth Warren, which was widely considered to be struggling. The state's political wise men

were tripping all over each other trying to advise Warren (in the press) that she had a thing or two to learn about campaigning for public office. Her lackluster ads and apparent refusal to respond strongly and effectively to Senator Brown's attacks on her character and integrity were making Democrats very nervous and providing journalists and media pundits with plenty of material to support their storyline of the race (i.e. it would be a nail bitter).

All the while, Warren's campaign continued to operate like that of an incumbent, and a seasoned incumbent at that. They understood that the structural dynamics strongly favored Warren and that they could afford to string along the media and essentially ignore the Brown attacks, which dominated media coverage of the race through the summer months and even into the fall. They understood that these attacks were not changing votes. Even the polling at the time indicated that while voters were disturbed by Brown's accusations, they did not think them relevant to their vote. Warren's camp knew that most voters saw the race in partisan terms, which played right into their preferred narrative of the race, and would put her over the top at the polls as long as she didn't do or say anything crazy (think Akin, Murdock and "legitimate rape"). Rather than engage Brown in a personal back and forth, Warren's camp was content to rest on their three-to-one registration advantage, the president's coattails, the very favorable national political narrative, and the vastly superior Democratic voter contact and G.O.T.V. operation in Massachusetts. Even the identity of the Republican presidential nominee gave Warren a leg up and Brown a head ache. They understood that all these advantages exempted them from the need to employ the "politics 101 standard operating procedure" for challengers facing personal attacks.

At times, Brown's camp also seemed to understand the reality of the 2012 race. They seemed to know that their guy would not get by on his personal skills or his efforts to distract voters from

the national political narrative. They knew that their only real chance of winning would require them to discredit Elizabeth Warren, making her an unacceptable candidate, as early and as convincingly as possible. Writing about the race at the time, I characterized their position as having to turn Warren into “Cruella Deville” by Labor Day. Warren’s stone walling and slow walking response to Brown’s early efforts to exploit her unclear Indian heritage and whether or not she had used it to advance her career drove the Democratic wise men nuts and fueled the horse race media coverage, much of which consisted of interviews with or commentary by “old school” Democratic pols and operatives scolding Warren’s campaign for what they saw as its many “rookie mistakes.” What these folks failed to see was that it was Warren, not Brown, who was in the driver’s seat all along. Warren’s advisors understood that the “fundamentals” of the contest fully justified a “prevent defense” strategy, especially during the summer months, and that Brown had little choice but to engage in high risk, high reward tactics while Warren could afford to essentially run out the clock. Though neither she nor any of her advisors are ever likely to acknowledge it, the race effectively proceeded according to plan, making the outcome an increasingly foregone conclusion at Election Day approached.

The 2013 Race to Fill John Kerry’s Seat

When the 2012 race was over, the attention of Massachusetts politicians turned to speculation about the possibility of another US Senate special election for John Kerry’s seat if or when he were tapped by the White House to replace Hilary Clinton as Secretary of State. Amazingly, serious analysts began speculating that another special election would give Scott Brown a second chance to exploit “special” circumstances and earn a return ticket to the US Senate. Suddenly, the factors that had been under-appreciated in the 2012 Brown-Warren race were said to be the very reasons why Brown would be the favorite to win a 2013 special US Senate election. The

lack of presidential coattails and the assumption that the lower turnout to be expected in a special election would redound to the benefit of Brown became the basis for a media narrative of the 2013 race as a potentially competitive affair.

Three Republican candidates stepped into the breach for the Mass GOP in 2013. Former US Attorney and interim Director of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, & Firearms, Mike Sullivan took up the mantle of the Massachusetts “Tea Party” in a race against former judge and current State Representative Dan Winslow and former Navy Seal and first time political candidate Gabriel Gomez. The more well-known Republicans, like Bill Weld, Kerry Healy, and Charlie Baker joined Brown in begging off on the 2013 contest, signaling their understanding of the difficulties of the race for the Republicans. On the Democratic side, Ed Markey and Stephen Lynch, both members of the state’s US House delegation battled for their party’s nod.

The conduct of this primary (on both sides of the isle) reflected the persistence of the myth that fueled Scott Brown’s 2012 re-election campaign. Ed Markey and Mike Sullivan ran for their parties’ nomination as the loyal partisans; the most liberal and conservative candidates respectively. Their opponents, however, bet their electoral fortunes on the myth of the “swing” voter and the imagined allure of the less partisan, more independent, general election candidate. Democrat Stephen Lynch and Republicans Gabriel Gomez and Dan Winslow wrongly attributed Scott Brown’s 2010 victory to his efforts to distance himself from his party, rather than his courtship of the hyper-partisan Tea Party effort to block President Obama’s legislative agenda in the Senate. They vastly over-estimated the centrality of his occasional efforts to sound the “independent thinker” trumpet in that successful campaign. These rhetorical flourishes from Brown in 2010 were a sort of rhetorical “standard operating procedure” that (in part at least) were just boiler plate jargon designed to exploit the media-generated, candidate-centric narrative

of the election as a horse race. They also must have assumed that the difference between victory and defeat for Scott Brown in 2012 lay in the “coattails” advantage enjoyed by Warren in 2012, that absent President Obama’s coattails, Brown’s “anti-partisan, independent leader” campaign appeals would have gotten him across the finish line ahead of Warren on Election Day.

Having exposed the electoral impotence of the Tea Party wing of the Mass G.O.P. in 2013 by beating the conservative candidate for the Republican nomination for John Kerry’s vacated senate seat by a wide margin, Republican Gabriel Gomez now faces the daunting task of campaigning against the Dean of the Massachusetts congressional delegation, Ed Markey, who also sailed to his party’s nomination, easily besting fellow Congressman Stephen Lynch, whose attempt to exploit anti-party and anti-establishment sentiment in the Democratic primary race (predictably) yielded a very different result than it did for Gomez on the Republican side, which was a bit harder to foresee. Markey’s easy victory reflects the strong unity at present between progressive activists and the Democratic establishment, while Gomez’s win suggests that the socially moderate to liberal “establishment” types in the Mass G.O.P. cannot be held hostage by their party’s “Tea Party” faction in the way the National Republican Party apparently can.

Out spending his opponents by leaps and bounds and securing the support of the Mass G.O.P.’s most high profile figures, such as Bill Weld, Kerry Healy, and Charlie Baker, won Gomez the opportunity to test the proposition that a moderate Republican can win a U.S. Senate election in Massachusetts by appealing to moderate, unenrolled voters with a classic outsider, anti-party, anti-establishment campaign, despite the absence of a favorable national political narrative or a well-developed political infrastructure in the state. This theory, as applied to the ongoing race, is thought to be bolstered by the fact that the Democratic nominee, Ed Markey, will not benefit from the so-called “coattails” effect, as Warren did in 2012. No other high profile statewide

contests will be on the June 25th election ballot with the Markey-Gomez race. Accordingly, unlike Brown in 2012, Gomez will not have to stake his campaign on attracting “ticket-splitters” the way Brown did.

Had Michael Sullivan (the candidate of the Republican wing of the Republican Party in the 2013 race) prevailed in the primary, the general election would have featured a straight up showdown between left and right that would have made Ed Markey’s election all but certain, as well as a bit less expensive. While Markey’s election remains “almost” all but certain, even with Gomez running a “Scott Brown-style” campaign in a low turnout contest with no other statewide races on the ballot, it is at least conceivable that some game changing event in the state or nation could intervene in a way that would benefit Gomez at the polls on Election Day. Gomez’s fundraising potential and inevitable focus on mass media advertising, however, is almost certain to compel Markey to shell out a bit more cash against Gomez than he would have felt the need to spend against Sullivan.

CONCLUSION

At present, it is simply unrealistic to assume that any Republican candidate could win an election for US Senate in Massachusetts. Scott Brown’s 2010 special election victory gave life to two popular theories among Bay State Republicans; 1) that Scott Brown was so good that he could break the Democratic Party’s lock on US Senate elections in the state through the force of his personal political skills, and 2) that Republicans have an advantage (or at least a fighting chance) in “special” elections for the US Senate in the state when the Democrats don’t enjoy the voter turnout advantages of so-called “coattails” effect. Elizabeth Warren’s relatively easy victory in 2012 and Brown’s decision to forego another bite at the apple in 2013 should dampen

enthusiasm for the first theory, while the defeat of Gabriel Gomez by Ed Markey in the 2013 “special” election would likely deflate confidence in the second theory.

There is no compelling evidence that U.S. Senate elections in Massachusetts are decided by the candidates’ performances on the campaign trail, or by the media’s candidate-centered, horse race coverage of campaigns. There is very little evidence that a sufficiently large “swing” vote exists in the Massachusetts electorate in U.S. Senate elections to carry any kind of Republican candidate to victory in a U.S. Senate race. Because of the numerous structural advantages enjoyed by Democrats in these contests, be they “special” or otherwise, only a political climate that fosters both grass roots conservative energy AND grass roots progressive disaffection can make Republican candidates legitimate contenders in U.S. Senate elections in the state.

Furthermore, the lessons of Brown’s 2010 victory seem to have been most well learned by the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, which has vastly improved its voter contact and outreach operations, as well as its working relationship with the party’s progressive wing. It will be a very long time before the Mass Dems take their structural advantages, or their progressive base, for granted in a U.S Senate election. The very rapid rallying of both the leading Democratic Party establishment figures and the party’s progressive base to the side of liberal Congressman Ed Markey in the 2013 race reflects the determination of Bay State Democrats to never again allow complacency or internal division to catch them off guard in a U.S. Senate race.

There is also little evidence that the bitterly polarized national political narrative at present is generating enough disaffection among moderate and/or unenrolled Massachusetts voters to make an “outsider, anti-establishment” Republican campaign a viable and realistic formula for winning a U.S. Senate seat. Rather, the academic research seems to point to the conclusion that national partisan polarization actually reinforces partisanship among voters, making it very difficult for

Republican candidates to divert voters' attention from the hyper-partisanship of the present U.S. Senate and instead frame Senate elections as a choice between candidates, or as a "battle" (cue music and graphics) between some generalized notion of the interests of "insiders" and "outsiders;" or between "the people" and "the politicians." Massachusetts voters see U.S. Senate elections in a nationalized and highly partisan context and are very unlikely to be distracted by either the personalized politics of attack and counter-attack or some version of an "all politics is local" approach to framing senate elections.

As long as hyper-partisanship and polarization are the rule in Washington, Massachusetts US Senate elections will be decided by partisan voters. The spectacular failure of radical moderate/anti-party movements like "No Labels" to transition from media generated elite advocacy to grass roots energy reveals the weakness of the "swing" voter strategy in energizing actual voters in the present political environment. The strategy of trying to energize moderates by exploiting anti-partisan sentiment is a loser for Democrats and Republicans in the Massachusetts, though for slightly different reasons. For Democrats, Brown's win and Warren's win have united the (formerly quarrelsome) Democratic establishment with its progressive base. Stephen Lynch fell short in his challenge to Ed Markey because he was out organized and because his target voters were less connected, less committed, and therefore less likely to vote. For Republicans, the outsider, anti-party strategy in a general U.S. Senate election is very unlikely to work because voters' frustrations with partisan bickering and gridlock appears to be mostly just an abstract sentiment, not unlike the general sense, which voters are as likely as non-voters to express, that "politics" is a dirty business. Obviously, that doesn't prevent voters from showing up at the polls.

When all the smoke clears, the “Scott Brown Era” in Massachusetts politics will probably be recorded as having spanned from Brown’s dramatic upset victory in the winter of 2010 to his decision to “cash out” of electoral politics in February 2013. Whether or not it is extended through Election Day in the 2013 race between Gabriel Gomez and Ed Markey depends on how well Gomez is able to perform on the campaign trail. Of course, that judgment will “almost” certainly be about how close he comes to Markey’s winning total in the final vote count. Obviously, if he were to win the race, the “expiration date” on the Scott Brown Era would be extended until at least the 2014 general election.

Scott Brown’s (and now Gabriel Gomez’s) political fortunes will provide valuable insights to students of elections and voting behavior on the relative significance of electoral “fundamentals” versus that of campaigns and candidate performance in determining the outcomes in Massachusetts U.S. Senate elections. Brown’s journey provided a clear illustration of the gap between the findings of academic research and the assumptions of political actors and analysts in the media and at this point I have good reason to believe that Gabriel Gomez’s electoral fate in 2013 will reinforce the lessons of the “Scott Brown Era” in Massachusetts politics. The opportunity watch and experience four U.S. Senate elections in less than five years has and will surely prove a boon to political scientists who study elections and voter behavior. It has already been especially valuable to those of us who spend a lot of our time thinking, reading, and writing about Massachusetts politics.