



Capitol Sources

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The Real Message from Massachusetts

Republican Scott Brown's victory in his bid for the U.S. Senate seat, here-to-fore known as the "Kennedy" seat, has become the political equivalent of the shot heard "round the world".

Democrats at all levels are now scrambling to rationalize Brown's victory as if it were a fluke - something between a bad day at the office and a missed slam dunk.. Meanwhile, Republicans are doing their level best to spin this as the fore-shock of a coming magnitude 9.0 political earthquake that could shift control of Congress back to the GOP., The leadership of both parties would be well served by a critical analysis of the voters decision in the Massachusetts Special Election.

There WAS a clear message in Scott Brown's come-from-behind victory on Tuesday, but it wasn't so much a partisan message as it was a populist shot across the bow of every incumbent legislator, in every party and at every level of government: Politics as usual is no longer acceptable to American voters

Most pundits have focused on exit polling data that indicated health care reform was the number one issue influencing their choice for U.S. Senate candidate in that race. Nearly every national exit poll agrees on this point. The polls indicate that this was the most important issue for 93% of those who turned out to vote in the Massachusetts Special Election, and the vast majority of those individuals - including even a narrow majority of union members - voted for Brown, and did so over health care.

However, this was far more a victory for old-fashioned conservative populism that it was for the GOP. Scott Brown won this election with overwhelming support from registered Independents - who outnumber registered Democrats by nearly two-to-one, and Republicans by more than four-to-one, in Massachusetts. His campaign advertising rarely even mentioned his party affiliation, and his message was focused on being a Washington outsider who would listen to and fight for the people of his state.

Nationally, Independent voters supported President Obama in 2008 and were critical to his victory. The President's job approval/disapproval ratings among Independents have slid from 58:25 in June to 40:47 as of January 17 (according to CBS news polls). But before Republicans can start popping open their Champagne and toasting "their impending return

to power”, , they should consider this statistic: When asked which party they were most angry at for our nation’s problems, nearly half – 48% - said they were angry at both parties, versus 9% who were angry at the Republicans and 11% who directed their anger at Democrats (CNN/Opinion Research Corp 1/22-24). This should convey a clear message to incumbents from both parties at all levels of government: Voters are clearly unhappy, and are likely to vent this anger at anybody currently in office, regardless of party affiliation, if they see an incumbent as ignoring their concerns or breaking promises made during the last election.

Throughout 2009, Democratic leadership in both the U.S. House and Senate continued pushing their health care reform legislation along on a fast track. Some details shifted and morphed over time, but they were hell-bent on getting a bill signed by the President by August 1 ... then Labor Day ... then Christmas ... Meanwhile, public support for the proposal plummeted, as did the President’s job approval ratings.

As the debate over health care reform devolved from providing “Medicare for all” to “Medicaid for all,” health care providers across the nation began holding their collective breath. Most knew that it would force providers out of business virtually overnight. And the general public was beginning to catch on to this fact.

What the public saw – and began reacting to so strongly - was the way the reform package was being cobbled together: Behind closed doors in the dark-of-night, in clear violation of every promise made by the President and Democrat party leaders, to make the process “transparent” and “open.” Candidate Obama even pledged to have all deliberations on the bill carried live on C-Span. Instead, staff and party leaders worked in secret, using every unseemly pork-barrel promise and special deal imaginable, to craft a reform package that nobody really liked.

Despite growing proportions of the electorate who were shifting from support of the plan to strong opposition, Congressional leadership and the President forged ahead. They seemed to be saying “We know what we promised, we know we’ve not delivered on those promises ... but this is just how things are done in the world of politics. We know you don’t like this reform package and where you think it is heading, but *TRUST US*, we know what is best for you. You will like it in the long-run.”

Two takeaways from the Massachusetts Senate elections are:

- 1) If you promise it, do it. Voters remember the promises you campaign on and make publicly. If you promise an open, deliberative process to develop major reform -- then deliver it. Those who live and die by old-school-politics-as- usual, regardless of party, are going to be vulnerable in 2010, and perhaps in 2012 as well.
- 2) There is NO consensus among voters as to the scope, nature or even necessity of health care reform. Few people – including many members of Congress – seem to understand that the public programs are those most responsible for undermining the nation’s health care delivery system. Most voters are clear that they DON’T want

this level of coverage for themselves or their families. The current reform package is a jumbled mess that faces an uphill political fight to gain passage. It is time to start this process over and deliver the process – and the policy reform – that was promised.