

THE MASSACHUSETTS ELECTION

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JAN 24 2010

A special election in Massachusetts held to select the replacement for Ted Kennedy as US Senator has had great political impact in the US with the victory of Scott Brown, the Republican candidate. The Kennedys, first JFK and then Teddy (with retainers inserted when technically required), had controlled the seat for 57 years. No Republican had held a Massachusetts seat (each state gets two senators) for four decades. Ronald Reagan was the last Republican to carry the state in a Presidential election. Obama won with well over 60 percent of the vote. Brown is only the 41st Republican senator in a Senate of a hundred members, and yet because of the rules of the Senate his election derails much President Obama's domestic agenda. The Republican win in Massachusetts was both unexpected and significant.

Foreign policy played a secondary in the election. Brown's overconfident Democratic Party opponent, the State Attorney General Martha Coakley, did seem ill-prepared on the subject, claiming as relevant experience the fact that she had a sister living abroad. Brown, a member of the Massachusetts Army National Guard, had been deployed overseas, though not to Iraq or Afghanistan, and thus seemed worldly in comparison. It didn't help Coakley's cause when she said that there were no terrorists in Afghanistan, likely meaning (still incorrectly) no al Qaeda members. And Brown was quick to stress the dangers in the Obama administration's mishandling of the information that could have thwarted the underwear bomber attack. Brown came across as a security hawk, certain to favor a tough attitude toward terrorists, while Coakley seemed unwilling to deviate from the anti-war inclinations that had long become identified with the Massachusetts Democrats.

The dominant issues in the campaign though were domestic, most especially the President's health care reform proposal. In a state government initiative, Massachusetts instituted universal health care coverage (98 % of the population is now covered) four years ago. That plan was promoted by the then Republican governor, the presidentially ambitious Mitt Romney, and had Scott Brown's vote (he has been a state senator). The national plan, proposed by the Democrats, is simply a variation of the Massachusetts plan which requires the purchase of approved health insurance coverage, fines for those who don't, and subsidies for those who can't afford it. The intent is to cover the uninsured, about 15 % of the population, without disturbing the access to care of everyone else. Why then all the opposition both in Massachusetts and nationally?

The answer lies in some important fears. Most Americans (and surely most people in Massachusetts where some of the finest medical facilities in the nation exist) are satisfied, the heated rhetoric notwithstanding, with the health care services that they already receive. They fear that increased access on the part of the uninsured will significantly raise system costs because of increased subsidies required and threaten rationing in some fashion that will hurt those who already have good insurance. The promises of increased efficiencies covering the increased costs are not believed. Neither are the claims that the health reform nationally will not lead to rationing. The stimulus package and the bailout of banks and the automobile industry have burdened the federal government with expanding deficits. Health care reform was being sold as necessary because of rising costs will further increase the government deficit. More taxes and some forced service constraints seem inevitable if it passed.

Health care reform in Massachusetts has already thrown the state government's budget into total disarray. The voters in Massachusetts worried that the Obama administration was determined to force through similar reforms nationally that would require them to pay for improved access to care for those in other states who aren't insured

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while threatening to curtail their own access. Brown said he would be the 41st vote in the Senate that he would block it, and Coakley said she would stand with Obama.

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Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.