

A debacle for Obama and the Democrats

Republican wins Massachusetts Senate race

Patrick Martin
20 January 2010

Republican Scott Brown won the special election Tuesday to fill the US Senate seat from Massachusetts left vacant by the death of Edward Kennedy, who held the seat for the Democrats for 47 years. Democrat Martha Coakley conceded shortly before 9:30 p.m., as vote-counting in 80 percent of precincts showed her trailing by a margin of 52 percent to 47 percent.

The defeat in Massachusetts is a major blow to the Democratic Party and the outcome of growing popular disillusionment with the Obama administration. Brown won by 5 percentage points over Coakley in a state which Obama carried in the presidential election by 26 points just over one year ago.

In the 2008 election, Obama received 1,891,083 votes in Massachusetts compared to 1,104,284 for his Republican opponent, John McCain. Brown appears likely, when all votes are counted, to match or actually exceed McCain's total, while Coakley's vote represents a dropoff of about 50 percent from Obama's total 14 months ago.

It must be said that this is a defeat the Democratic Party made possible and richly deserved. Obama's right-wing policies on the bank bailout, his cost-cutting healthcare overhaul and his continuation and expansion of the wars of the Bush administration have antagonized millions who supported him in 2008 and alienated Democratic Party base voters.

Anecdotal reports indicated light turnout in African-American and other minority districts in Boston, Springfield and other cities, and a comparatively heavy turnout in more upscale middle-class suburbs, particularly around Boston, where Brown rolled up

large margins. Brown was leading among union members in pre-election polls, in part because of the Obama administration's support for a tax on higher-cost employer-sponsored healthcare plans.

The Obama administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress have been indifferent to the economic distress of broad masses of workers and middle-class people, while doling out trillions in federal resources to prop up the banks and enable them to return to profitability and dispense gargantuan bonuses to executives and traders.

The unemployment rate in Massachusetts was more than 9 percent last summer, and it remains above 8.5 percent, double the level in 2007. That figure does not include the tens of thousands of workers no longer actively seeking jobs or working only part-time.

It is hard to top the cynicism of Obama's visit to Massachusetts Sunday, when he campaigned with Coakley at a rally at Northeastern University in Boston, hailing her as a fighter against Wall Street and denouncing Brown as "another vote for the banks." Given the administration's record over the past year, Obama has zero credibility posturing as a populist opponent of the big financial interests, and that was reflected at the polls on Tuesday.

The defeat in Massachusetts is a debacle for both Obama and the Democratic Party as a whole. The Senate seat has been held by a Democrat for 58 years, since John F. Kennedy first won it in 1952. There is not a single Republican in Congress from Massachusetts, Democrats hold a 3-1 margin in party registration and control both houses of the state legislature by large

margins, as well as the governorship.

At the same time, the victory of the Republicans is a warning to the working class. Within the framework of the US two-party system, in which the two officially recognized parties are controlled by big business and serve its interests, the growing popular hostility to Obama and the Democrats is exploited by the Republican Party to pursue its own right-wing agenda.

Brown centered his campaign on a pledge to be the “41st vote” against Obama’s healthcare plan in the US Senate, where 41 votes are required to uphold a filibuster and block legislation. He was able to exploit opposition to Obama’s healthcare policies from both the right and the left—appealing both to the ultra-right base of the Republican Party, which regards any government role in healthcare as socialism, and to the well-founded distrust of working people and the elderly, who recognize that the Obama plan sets the stage for major cuts in both employer-paid health benefits and the federal Medicare program.

In the last days before the special election, as polls showed Brown taking a significant lead, the share prices of health insurance and drug companies shot up, reflecting the calculation on Wall Street that the loss of the 60-vote Democratic majority in the Senate will facilitate the passage of legislation even more favorable to corporate interests.

The inevitable political result of the Massachusetts vote will be a further shift to the right by Obama, the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics as a whole. The corporate-controlled media has already drawn the conclusion that the special election proves that Obama has been too left-wing and must “moderate” his supposed big-spending liberalism.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized Tuesday: “As they have each time in the last 40 years that they have had total control of Washington, Democrats are proving again that America can’t be successfully governed from the left. If that is the lesson Mr. Obama learns from Massachusetts, he might still salvage his presidency.”

Journal is no doubt correct that Obama ~~will~~ take the lesson from Massachusetts that he must move to the right. But the editors are deluded in the extreme if they believe that the American people—two years into the biggest economic collapse since the 1930s, triggered by a speculative mania on Wall Street—are moving to the right.

The Republican Party profited in Massachusetts from a rising tide of popular disillusionment and opposition to the Obama administration, and they expect to do so again in the congressional elections later this year. But tens of millions of working people, facing the loss of their jobs, homes and livelihoods, and the destruction of their children’s future, are not inclined to embrace the “free market” nostrums of the ultra-right.

Workers and young people must turn their efforts to the building of an independent mass political movement directed against the entire political establishment and the capitalist financial aristocracy.



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