

Obama, Democrats in crisis over Massachusetts Senate race

Patrick Martin
19 January 2010

Senior Democratic Party leaders, from President Obama on down, were mobilized over the weekend in a last-ditch effort to prevent an upset Republican victory in the special election January 19 to fill the US Senate vacancy in Massachusetts.

Democrat Martha Coakley, the state attorney general, is tied with Republican Scott Brown or even trailing in many recent polls in the contest to fill the seat held by the late Edward M. Kennedy for 47 years. The seat has been in Democratic hands continuously for the past 58 years, since John F. Kennedy won election in 1952.

The state of Massachusetts is most heavily Democratic, in electoral terms, of the 50 states, with a Democratic governor, a state legislature with a greater than two-thirds majority for the Democrats in both houses, and not a single Republican in Congress.

The last time a Massachusetts Republican won election to the House of Representatives was 1994. No Republican has won a Massachusetts seat in the US Senate since 1972.

Massachusetts voted for the last three Democratic presidential candidates by margins over 60 percent. Registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans three-to-one in the state.

The outcome of Tuesday's election remains in doubt, but the very fact that Brown, an obscure state senator, could take the lead in some pre-election polls testifies to the mounting crisis of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. The loss of the Massachusetts Senate seat would send shockwaves through the party and stoke mounting fears of a debacle in this year's congressional elections in November.

In a symptom of this political trend, Congressman Vic Snyder, an Arkansas Democrat, announced last week that he would not seek reelection. Snyder was facing a heavily funded Republican challenger in a district that voted overwhelmingly for Republican presidential candidate John McCain in 2008. Snyder is the fifth conservative "Blue Dog" Democrat in the House to announce his premature retirement, although there are still more Republicans than Democrats who have opted not to run for reelection in the House.

As recently as six weeks ago, when Coakley won an easy victory in the Democratic primary on December 8, it was conventional wisdom that she would win the special election

easily. Some 668,000 people voted in the contested Democratic primary, compared to 165,000 who took part in the Republican contest, where Brown was the consensus candidate of the party establishment.

Brown has waged a campaign of demagogic pseudo-populism, presenting himself as a "common man" who drives a pickup truck (he is a well-heeled lawyer and state legislator), while portraying Coakley as the personification of the Democratic Party "elite." He has capitalized on the widespread disillusionment with the Obama administration's policies, above all the recognition that the government has bailed out Wall Street while doing nothing for working people faced with unemployment and wage-cutting. The rising unemployment rate and the evident failure of the Obama administration to do anything to provide jobs has been a major theme in the campaign.

The pre-election polls show a collapse in support for the Democrats, rather than any upsurge in support for the ultra-right nostrums of the Republicans (Brown, for instance, reportedly does not believe in evolution—in a state with more institutions of higher education than any other). Polls suggest that the turnout among Democrats and those who voted for Obama in 2008 will be far lower on a percentage basis than among Republicans and McCain voters.

The poll numbers also reveal a growing understanding that the healthcare reform program making its way through Congress threatens the benefits of working people and Medicare recipients, while protecting the insurance companies, drug manufacturers and other large corporate interests.

Obama's support for taxing so-called "Cadillac" healthcare benefits—which could affect hundreds of thousands of union members in Massachusetts—has hurt the Democratic campaign. One poll showed that while union leaders unanimously backed Coakley, union members planning to vote were supporting Brown by 53 percent to 45 percent.

Brown has sought to exploit popular disillusionment and anger, presenting his campaign as a referendum on the Obama healthcare program and promising to be the "41st vote" in the Senate to defeat it. The bill passed the Senate by a 60-40 vote, the bare minimum needed to overcome the Republican filibuster, including the vote of Senator Paul Kirk, who was

appointed to temporarily fill the vacancy left by Kennedy's death.

Some of those voting for Brown are doing so out of fear that the Obama healthcare plan, which calls for hundreds of billions of dollars in Medicare spending cuts, will reduce their benefits. A 76-year-old woman told the *Washington Post*, "The health care has got me really worried." A single mother who raised eight children on welfare and always voted Democratic, Jeanne Jekanowski told the *Post*, "I'm scared to death they're going to reduce my Medicare."

Brown has attacked Coakley from the right on issues of national security. A lieutenant colonel in the Massachusetts National Guard, he denounced Coakley for her opposition to Obama's decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan. He also criticized Obama for the decision to try Christmas Day bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in a civilian court instead of before a military tribunal.

After initially deciding not to campaign in Massachusetts, Obama reversed himself and appeared with Coakley at a rally Sunday at Northeastern University in Boston, where he launched a demagogic attack on Brown as the candidate of Wall Street.

Citing the proposal from his administration to impose a minimal surtax on major banks that received bailout funds, Obama declared, "Martha's opponent already is walking in lockstep with Washington Republicans. She's got your back; her opponent's got Wall Street's back."

In another applause line to the crowd that jammed a basketball arena, Obama said, "Bankers don't need another vote in the United States Senate. They've got plenty."

If Obama were to speak the truth, he would have to say that the banks have 100 votes in the US Senate, as well as 435 in the House of Representatives and the all-out backing of the White House. The Obama administration is responsible for loans, cash infusions and guarantees totaling up to \$23.7 trillion for the financial aristocracy which both the Democrats and the Republicans serve.

In the Massachusetts campaign, Obama and the Democrats are reaping what they have sowed over the past two years. The 2008 presidential campaign was a fraud, organized by powerful sections of the ruling elite who wanted a new face to pursue essentially the same policies as those pursued by Bush, albeit with some important tactical modifications. Obama campaigned as the candidate of change, of new politics, of a progressive but deliberately vague "reform" agenda. Once in office—and even before, in the case of the bank bailout—his administration has been one of Wall Street, the military and the intelligence-security apparatus.

Under the undemocratic US two-party system, there is no reflection of the leftward-moving views and aspirations of the broad masses. If the people of Massachusetts were actually voting in a referendum on an even minimally progressive healthcare program—say, the expansion of Medicare to cover

every American—there is little doubt they would approve it by a massive majority. Obama gives them no such choice.

The cynicism of Obama's latest effort at false populism—featured in his Wall Street-bashing radio speech Saturday as well as his remarks in Massachusetts—was admitted by a liberal supporter, columnist Robert Kuttner, in remarks on *Huffington Post*. He noted that he had received numerous robo-calls at his home in Massachusetts, including one from Obama.

He wrote: "In Obama's call, he advised me that he needed Martha Coakley in the Senate, 'because I'm fighting to curb the abuses of a health insurance industry that routinely denies care.' Let's see, would that be the same insurance industry that [White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel] was cutting inside deals with all spring and summer? The same insurance industry that spent tens of millions on TV spots backing Obama's bill as sensible reform? If voters are wondering which side this guy is on, he has given them good reason."

At least in the short term, the mass disappointment and growing anger toward Obama and the Democrats redounds to the advantage of the Republicans. The perverse peculiarity of the US two-party system is that no matter how often voters express their desire for progressive change, the candidates once in office discard their campaign promises and ignore the views of the voters, in order to serve the interests of the financial-corporate elite. However bitter the internecine rivalry between the two parties, there is little in the way of substantive differences dividing them.

The fact that the Democrats have so much difficulty beating, and could even lose to a run-of-the-mill right-wing politician in the most liberal US state is a testimony to their bankruptcy and political duplicity.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact