

After the defeat in Massachusetts, Democrats lurch to the right

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The three weeks since the special election to the US Senate in Massachusetts have seen a deepening political crisis of the Democratic Party. The party which controls the White House and has huge majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives has bowed and scraped before the minority Republican Party, which was repudiated by the electorate in the 2008 election.

On January 29, President Obama, as part of his “outreach” to the Republicans, met with the entire House Republican caucus—whose members include several co-thinkers of the “birthers,” the ultra-right elements who claim Obama is of foreign birth and hence occupies the White House illegitimately.

Obama announced later that he would begin to hold regular meetings with the House and Senate Republican leaders (along with their Democratic counterparts), something rarely done by President George W. Bush when the Democrats were in the minority.

This obsessive deference to the Republicans is not new. From the first days of his administration, Obama has sought to rehabilitate the Republican Party. His administration has to all appearances been based on the premise that its success, and perhaps survival, is dependent on winning the support of sections of the minority party. This is bound up with the contradiction between the appeals his campaign made to popular aspirations for progressive change and the repudiation of his campaign promises once in office and pursuit of a uniformly right-wing program.

For their part, the Republicans early on took their measure of the Obama administration and decided to block its initiatives, calculating they would benefit from growing popular anger and frustration. Despite Obama’s appeals, they show no signs of abandoning this strategy.

At a special session of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) Saturday, Obama sought to buck up the party’s spirits after its recent electoral defeats, including the gubernatorial contests in Virginia and New Jersey last November and the January 19 loss of the Massachusetts

Senate seat held for five decades by Edward M. Kennedy.

The Massachusetts election, in particular, was an unmistakable expression of growing popular disillusionment with the former candidate of “change” and “hope.” Under conditions of near-Depression levels of unemployment and rising poverty, Democratic voters, angered over the refusal of the administration to provide jobs, its efforts to cut health care services for millions of workers, and its ongoing bailout of Wall Street, either abstained in large numbers or registered a protest by voting for the little-known Republican candidate.

Despite the loss in Massachusetts, however, the Democratic caucus in the Senate controls 59 of 100 seats—the largest number held by either party in more than 30 years, except for the brief period from June 2009, when Democrat Al Franken was certified the winner of the Senate seat in Minnesota, to last month.

Since the defeat in Massachusetts, both the White House and leading congressional Democrats have shifted further to the right. Obama has made it clear that his entire legislative agenda will be subordinated to reaching bipartisan consensus with the Republican Party.

This shift cannot be explained as a consequence of the loss of two governorships and a Senate seat, or of political calculations related to the upcoming congressional elections in November. The Republican Party remains widely discredited and unpopular, standing far lower in the polls than either Obama personally or the Democratic Party as a whole.

Throughout the period of Republican congressional dominance, from 1994 to 2006, with a House caucus never larger than 232 out of 435, compared to the current Democratic caucus of 257, and a Senate majority never larger than 55 out of 100, compared to the current Democratic caucus of 59, the Republican Party pursued its right-wing program aggressively and without restraint, going so far as to impeach a twice-elected president, Bill Clinton, in 1998.

In early 2001, after Bush was installed in the White House

by the Supreme Court, despite having received half a million fewer votes than Democrat Al Gore, the Republicans controlled the Senate by the barest of margins, a 50-50 split with Vice President Cheney casting the tiebreaker. Nonetheless, aided by 12 Democrats, the new Republican administration pushed through its signature domestic policy, a \$1.1 trillion tax cut aimed largely at the wealthiest Americans.

In 2009, despite enjoying a 59-40 margin in the Senate, increased to 60 with the swearing in of Franken in June, the Democrats and the Obama administration were unable to enact any significant legislation, except for measures to continue and expand the Wall Street bailout and a stimulus package consisting largely of tax cuts and extended unemployment benefits, but avoiding any hint of public works or other direct job creation.

This historical record refutes the claim—now peddled incessantly by media pundits—that the Obama administration and the Democratic Party are compelled to change course and shift further to the right because they no longer control the vital 60-vote margin in the US Senate required to halt a filibuster. If the Democratic Party was advancing genuinely popular and socially progressive policies, it would be able to mobilize sufficient public support to overcome anti-democratic tactics by the minority opposition.

The reasons for the defensiveness and disarray of the Democrats and the aggressiveness and arrogance of the Republicans have nothing to do with either procedural obstacles or short-term electoral considerations. They rather relate to the intrinsic nature of each party and the differing roles they play within the US two-party political structure.

Both parties, the Democrats no less than the Republicans, are parties of the financial aristocracy, devoted to the defense of the property and profits of the ruling elite, both at home and abroad. In foreign policy, there is little to separate the two. Both are deeply reactionary instruments of US imperialism, as Obama now demonstrates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and other potential battlefields, to say nothing of Iraq.

In domestic policy, the two parties have served distinct purposes for the ruling elite. The Republican Party has long been the most intransigent opponent of any measures to restrain the depredations of the financial elite, while the Democratic Party postured as the “friend of labor,” the party which advocated a greater measure of “fairness” or even “social justice” in the operations of the capitalist system.

The ruling elite has generally preferred the Democrats during periods of acute economic and social crisis, as in the 1930s and the 1960s, and today with Obama. Of particular importance has been the role of the trade unions, which have subordinated the working class to the Democratic Party and

sought to block any popular struggle against the government, even more openly when a Democratic administration was in the White House.

This specific political role inevitably gives the Democratic Party a two-faced character. Republican politicians present their right-wing nostrums with an undisguised ferocity and determination. Democrats are typically half-hearted, insipid and insincere.

They make appeals to working people on behalf of policies that are tailored to the interests of the millionaires and billionaires. Many of the politicians are themselves multi-millionaires, a fact which gives their “populism” even less credibility. And this supposedly “people’s” party includes a sizeable bloc of right-wingers, in both the House and the Senate—invariably dubbed “moderates”—who regularly vote with the Republicans.

Over the past two decades, under the auspices of formations such as the Democratic Leadership Council, once headed by Bill Clinton, the Democratic Party has moved significantly further to the right in its public policy offerings, essentially disavowing any social program outside of the private market. This is what has given such a reactionary character to efforts like the health care plan of Obama, which is completely subordinated to the profit interests of the insurance companies and drug manufacturers.

The prostration of the Democrats opens the door to an even more right-wing political outcomes, along the lines of the ultra-right hysterics of the Tea Party convention and the demands by congressional Republicans for the complete privatization of Medicare and Medicaid and the other remnants of past social reforms such as Social Security.

The only alternative is for working people to break out of the framework of the big business-controlled two-party system. An independent mass political movement must be built to oppose the profit system and advance a socialist program to meet the needs of the people for jobs, decent living standards, education, health care and housing, and to defend democratic rights and oppose the bipartisan foreign program of militarism and imperialist war.

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