

Ayanna Pressley upsets 10-term Massachusetts congressman in Democratic primary

Kate Randall
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Ayanna Pressley beat out 10-term US Rep. Michael Capuano in the race for the Democratic nomination in Massachusetts' 7th Congressional District on Tuesday. Boston City Council member-at-large Pressley won decisively, defeating Capuano by a 59 to 41 percent margin.

As the Republicans are not fielding a candidate in the 7th District, Pressley, 44, is poised to become the first African-American woman in the Massachusetts congressional delegation.

Pressley, who lacked the support of much of the Massachusetts Democratic Party establishment, ran on the slogan "Change Can't Wait." She was widely outspent by Capuano, who had the support of Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, the Congressional Black Caucus PAC, Massachusetts' first African-American governor Deval Patrick, and civil rights veteran Rep. John Lewis.

The sixty-six-year-old Capuano, clearly caught off guard, conceded with barely 13 percent of the votes counted Tuesday evening, saying: "I'm sorry it didn't work out, but this is life, and this is OK. America's going to be OK. Ayanna Pressley is going to be a good congresswoman, and I will tell you that Massachusetts will be well served."

Capuano says this because there was little of substance that separated the politics of Pressley's campaign with that of his own. Her one discernible difference with the incumbent was over their attitude toward Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). While Capuano called for reforming the agency from within, Pressley called for its abolition.

The media was quick to draw parallels between Pressley's surprise victory and that in July of self-proclaimed democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez over longtime House incumbent Joseph Crowley in New York's 14th District. Their wins—along with those of African-American gubernatorial candidates Andrew Gillum in Florida and Stacey Abrams in Georgia—are cited as evidence of a significant shift to the left by the Democratic Party.

Ocasio-Cortez, who had campaigned earlier this year with Pressley, tweeted Tuesday night, "Congratulations to my sister in service, @AyannaPressley, on continuing her historic path in Congress tonight. Let's push together to make Medicare for All, tuition free college, & living wages a reality in America—all without corporate PAC money."

Despite Ocasio-Cortez's claims that Pressley represents a historic change, her victory has traded in a conventional liberal politician for a younger, equally conventional one, whose main difference is skin color. While the lopsided vote for Pressley expresses a movement of workers and young people to the left and a desire for change, sending her to Washington will result in no meaningful shift in the pro-big-business policies of the Democratic Party, or improvement in the conditions of workers.

The 7th Congressional District was redrawn following the 2010 Census to include a majority of African-American, Hispanic and Asian residents. With only 34 percent white residents, it is the only Massachusetts district with a majority of ethnic minority residents. It now comprises wards in Boston, along with the cities of Somerville, Randolph, Chelsea and Everett, as well as portions of Cambridge and Milton.

Pressley ran a campaign based largely on race and gender, saying that she spoke for "communities that far

too often go unseen and unheard.” As a survivor of sexual abuse, she also said on the campaign trail, “I fundamentally believe that the people closest to the pain should be closest to the power.” She said that with the demographic changes in the 7th District, “the needs have changed, and given what’s happening in Washington, the job description has changed.”

Clearly referring to Donald Trump as “what’s happening in Washington,” she poses no differences with his administration on foreign policy or the build-up of the Pentagon, any mention of which is absent from her campaign website. Her criticisms of the president are of a purely demagogic and personal character, denouncing him as “racist, misogynistic, truly empathy-bankrupt man.”

Pressley’s rise has followed a path similar to that of other Democratic Party “stars.” Growing up on the north side of Chicago, she had a difficult childhood. Her mother worked multiple jobs to support the family, including as a community organizer for the Chicago Urban League. Pressley’s father, who struggled with addiction throughout her childhood, eventually became a college professor.

After living for a while in Brooklyn, Pressley came to Boston, where she attended Boston University from 1992 to 1994. It was there that she had her first taste of Democratic Party politics, serving as an intern for US Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II. After leaving BU, she worked for Kennedy as a district representative, then scheduler, and then as his constituency director.

She served under two Democratic Massachusetts senators. She had a brief stint as the political director and senior aide to Ted Kennedy. During 2009, she also served as political director for John Kerry, managing his relationships with city, state and federal officials.

Pressley was elected to the Boston City Council in November 2009, becoming the first woman of African-American or Latina heritage in the 100-year history of the council. She was reelected to the council in 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017. In January 2018, she announced that she was challenging Capuano in the 7th District.

She supported Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016. She opposed Bernie Sanders’ bid, along with his proposal for “Medicare for All.” She has since come around to support Medicare for All, as well as tuition-free college, and a “living wage”—all proposals that amount to cynical posturing,

with no chance of passage even if Pressley is part of a Democratic majority when she takes office next January.

In an op-ed in Wednesday’s *New York Times*, Melanye Price wrote approvingly: “Historic electoral wins, like Ayanna Pressley’s major upset... along with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, show the might of the black political left.”

For rising Democratic Party figures like Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez, their victories have nothing to do with steering the party to the left—and advancing the interests of working people—and everything to do with providing the party with a “progressive” left veneer as they aspire to their positions of privilege within the upper middle class.



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