

Change Dems Change!

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And so Scott Brown, a wealthy conservative Republican could run as “a man of the people” against the "Massachusetts machine," against big government and elitist Democrats out of touch with real people. Sad but true.

Of course there is no single reason for Brown’s win. Candidate and campaign factors, national and state factors, all played a role. Still, I think Coakley could have won with a different campaign, and her loss certainly has lessons for activists and the Democratic establishment in Massachusetts and nationally:

- Liberals and progressives win when they bring new voters to the polls and keep them and their natural base engaged.
- Democrats’ need to challenge class privilege, power and inequality in their message and when they govern.
- Conservatism created the current crisis and needs to be criticized directly.

Recruit New Voters & Engage Your Supporters: In 2006, Governor Patrick won with new and liberal voters. In 2008, President Obama won with new, liberal and swing voters.

In 2010, Coakley did not recruit new voters and she did not win. That campaign did not make an effort to get support from new voters, people of color and younger voters, and she discouraged working class voters, whom she likely thought of as part of her natural base. When Coakley, and then even Obama, attacked and made fun of Brown’s pick-up truck, they attacked an important part of



working class life. These unfortunate remarks only reinforced Republicans' mantra that Democrats don't really understand and serve common people and are driven by ideology. Coakley and Democrats ignored new voters and lost the symbolic war to identify with average people.

As elections across the country and in Massachusetts have demonstrated, liberal and progressive Democratic majorities can be won and in some very surprising places. But this kind of majority is generally built with large groups of people who don't vote regularly. Large segments of this majority are reluctant and even hostile to voting. While their attitudes aren't empowering, they are not unreasonable given the history of disappointments at the hands of Democratic leaders. Simply, new and infrequent voters from these groups need a personal contact and their communities need to be brought in by the campaign and candidate, as well as by efforts of recognized nonpartisan and independent organizations and leaders with roots in these constituencies.

Challenge Class Power and Inequality: Democrats need to do more to connect with new and working class voters. The victorious Republican Brown won with the votes of many who think the Obama Administration is failing to do enough to help average people. Recent polls by Research 2000 and Hart Research identified a large number of liberal Obama voters who stayed home, and swing voters who cast votes for Brown in 2010 but had supported Obama in 2008. But Brown's claims to be on the side of the average person and the "candidate for change" would have fallen flat and swing voters would have tangible reasons to support a less than ideal Democratic candidate if the financial bailout money had



gone to struggling households and communities, not greedy financiers and bankers.

Unfortunately, after assuming office, President Obama has pursued Republicans for support for his legislative agenda and his message and statements have been moderate and centrist. His most prominent legislative proposals have been moderate and centrist. As a result he's lost much of the active support of his liberal and progressive base and disappointed new voters, all expecting stronger rhetoric and bold policies. Here in Mass, our Chief Executive Gov. Patrick has also lost the active support of his base and disappointed new voters. His message of change has targeted state government and the legislature, where change is certainly much needed. But, like Obama, he has not challenged the role of greedy corporate and financial executives here in our state who have enriched themselves at the expense of the broad majority. His proposals to date have not included measures that would do so, such as a wealth tax to fund needed public programs. Both Democratic leaders and politics are still out of step with the people and the times, and they need to do a better job catching up and connecting with new and working class voters.

Republicans do have it easier. They simply attack the government and public institutions, making their case they are fighting for the average person, just as Brown did and so many conservatives before him. But the rich and powerful benefit handily from this political slight-of-hand. In our times, with great disparities of wealth and power, Democrats need to challenge this conservative frame directly and take steps to address the power and privileges of wealth and



reign in the excesses of the corporate and financial elites. Doing so, they can begin restoring American's confidence in government and political leaders.

Criticize Conservative Politics and Philosophy: Conservatives attack liberals and Liberalism regularly and repeatedly. But Obama and the national Democratic Party have not made a serious or sustained effort to call right-wing conservatism what it is: a mythology of American individualism that masks selfish enrichment and perpetuates inequality by design. Democrats have not helped Americans to see through the conservatives' phony rhetoric and messaging, political framing that hides its exploitive and harmful impact on the overwhelming majority of people. Through his first year as President, Obama's rhetoric and leadership have emphasized bipartisanship and "reaching across the aisle." This approach has allowed conservatism and Republicans to stay current and seemingly survive a string of national catastrophes. Even in our Massachusetts, "the bluest state," conservative attitudes among voters and Democratic politicians toward taxes, toward inequality of incomes and opportunity, have stymied the leadership of Governor Patrick.

Like Patrick, Like Obama? Governor Patrick and President Obama both gave speeches within days of Republican Scott Brown's victory over Democrat Martha Coakley. Both Patrick and Obama performed well, acknowledged Coakley's loss, the shortcomings in their efforts, admonishing their political opponents and the frustrated public to be engaged in the process and contribute to solutions. Still, the obstacles to their leadership remain and their political prospects are in question.



Although Patrick and Obama both have partisan majorities in their legislatures, both leaders are frustrated by inertia and the status quo within their party. Obama also confronts an aggressive Republican opposition. But something is missing.

Neither Patrick nor Obama have an effective strategy to drive their agenda and preserve the active support of their new voters, voters who are the “value-added” to Democratic political capital. Neither has governed with or for their base. Gov. Patrick relinquished the support of his activist base, and dismissed the counsel of insiders from previous Democratic administrations. As President, Obama adopted the tired conservative leadership strategies of Clinton and Carter, Democratic presidents who each governed under very different circumstances than we find today.

Nothing better exemplifies this situation for Gov. Patrick than the tension with leaders from the African American community. The Governor has not been able to squarely address their community and political needs within his framework of “change.” Likewise, Obama doesn’t want to be too closely linked to the Congressional Black Caucus, and he actively resists any strategic partnering with progressives in the House and Senate. Liberals and independents are drifting from Democratic leadership, unhappy with the lack of tangible changes that address the stark inequalities of wealth and power that undermine our confidence in government and politics. Both President Obama and Gov. Patrick are left governing without the engaged support of their once active constituencies.

The Democratic Party is challenged, here in Massachusetts and nationally, by the demands of our times, by enforcers of the status quo, and by their own



assumptions of leadership. To make significant change, Democrats need a progressive majority and a progressive majority is built by reaching out beyond traditional voters to new voters and emerging constituencies. These are the people that will sustain them and support real change.

The moral of the story? *Democrats-change thyself.* Times have changed and the strategy of Democratic politics and governance need to change to lead. Recruit new voters, deliver for your base and keep your supporters and engaged. Challenge class privilege, power and the stark inequality that undermines our confidence in government and political leadership. Call out conservatism for its falsehoods and failures and help Americans get beyond it. Change Dems, change.

