

Course Correction

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Last winter, Massachusetts voters did more than deliver a stunning rebuke to the transformative agenda obdurately pursued by President Barack Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, and their minions. They also gave Democrats a potentially useful hint for this fall: tack to the center and perhaps voters can yet be mollified.

No doubt several factors were involved in Scott Brown's January victory in which he became the first Republican in Massachusetts in almost fifty years to win election to the United States Senate. Attorney General Martha Coakley ran an atrocious campaign; Brown ran an excellent one. A persistent 10 percent unemployment rate soured voters on the party that controls the presidency and, by large margins, both houses of Congress.

But even in that unfavorable environment, Massachusetts remains a state in which Democrats outnumber Republicans three to one. A Democratic nominee for the Senate seat that Edward M. Kennedy held for forty-six years might have prevailed had it not been for Obama's uncompromising determination, in the face of a historic economic crisis, to focus his party on passing (ultimately without a single Republican vote) comprehensive health care reform.

During the several months leading up to the Massachusetts Senate election, polls showed that Democrats were bleeding moderates and independents. Evidence accumulated that these disgruntled, disillusioned voters—crucial to the Democrats' 2008 triumph and crucial to a GOP comeback—disliked the emphasis on comprehensive health care reform and instead wanted the president and Congress to concentrate on creating jobs and controlling the skyrocketing deficit.

These voters let it be known that they preferred a less costly, more limited government than the grandiose one Democrats in Washington were busy crafting. Yet the president and party leaders gave the distinct impression that they cared as little about moderates' and independents' views as they did about those of Republicans. Unfortunately for the Democratic leaders, Republicans plus moderates and independents constitute a substantial electoral majority.

The relentlessness with which Democrats pursued an extremely partisan vision of health care reform suggested that members of team Obama had been poor students of the American people's preference for political moderation. This preference was clear the last time a Democrat held the White House.

In 1994, with the economy on the mend, Bill and Hillary Clinton's ill-conceived efforts at comprehensive health care reform did at least as much as Newt Gingrich and the Contract With America to provoke voters to send Republican majorities to the Senate and, for the first time since 1952, the House.

President Clinton got the message. In 1996, he shifted to the center and, teaming up with the Republican Congress, signed into law fundamental welfare reform that reflected both conservative and progressive convictions.

In the late 1990s, Republicans too showed that they did not grasp that moderation in Washington is a virtue prized by voters. Taken together, the House's impeachment of Clinton and the Senate's acquittal probably captured the nuanced view, consistent with measures of majority opinion, that although Clinton deserved a public reproach for his disreputable and perhaps unlawful conduct in connection to independent counsel Kenneth Starr's investigation, his offenses did not warrant removal from office. By proceeding along partisan lines, however, the Republican-directed inquiry, impeachment, and Senate trial laid the foundations for the view—common today among moderates, independents, and not a few economic or libertarian conservatives—that the Republican Party is dominated by intolerant moralists.

Voters have let it be known that they prefer a less costly, more limited government than the grandiose one Democrats are busy crafting.

Scott Brown's victory has given Obama and the Democratic Party an excellent reminder that the American people desire to be governed moderately. Failure to seize the opportunity—if only to save their own skins—will reflect political foolishness or a bullheaded devotion to a divisive partisan agenda, or both.

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