

# How A Topsy-Turvy Political World Got Turned Upside Down Again

*All Of A Sudden, The Future Of Big, Contentious Bills, Like Health Care And Climate Change, Is Up In The Air. Will The White House Hit The 'Reset' Button?*



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A few weeks ago, most Democrats and even many Republicans would have scoffed at the notion that a little-known Republican state senator from Massachusetts could win a U.S. Senate seat held for almost half a century by the late Ted Kennedy. Even more unimaginable: the Democrats' filibuster proof 60-vote majority in the U. S. Senate would disappear.

But despite a whirlwind of last minute get-out-the-vote activity in the "deep blue" Democratic state, Scott Brown beat Attorney General and Democratic candidate Martha Coakley by an amazing 52 to 47 margin. Just one year ago, President Obama carried that same state by 26 points. Some have called it, "the Scott heard round the world."

So what does an East Coast election have to do with the future of agriculture in the High Plains or the Delta region? All of a sudden, the future of big contentious bills, like health care and cap-and-trade climate legislation, is up in the air. And several Democrats, fearing a tide of angry voters, not unlike they witnessed in 1994 when a "Republican Revolution" won back the majorities in both the House and the Senate, have decided that retirement looks better than a re-election fight. Will history repeat itself?

## History as a guide

Historically, the party in control of the White House loses seats during a mid-term election. It doesn't matter if the President is a Democrat or Republican. But it is the extent of the expected political losses that have political pundits blogging and twittering away, especially in states that have historically elected conservative Democrats.

"Where there is trouble in Massachusetts, there is trouble everywhere and they know it," Brown told cheering supporters after his election victory. And GOP challengers around the country wasted no time piling on to that message. In Arkansas, one of the leading GOP candidates poised to challenge Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), issued a statement about how the political winds are changing.

"Blanche Lincoln should look at this and realize if Democrats can't win in Massachusetts, she can't win in Arkansas," emphasized U.S. Senate Candidate Sen. Gilbert Baker. The most recent Rasmussen Reports telephone survey of likely voters in Arkansas shows Lincoln's support for reelection at 38% or 39% no matter which of four potential Republican challengers she is matched against.

Facing strong political headwinds, the list of those who would rather retire than fight for reelection appears to be growing. Long-time Senators like North Dakota's Byron Dorgan and Connecticut's Chris Dodd decided to throw in the towel this year.

In the House of Representatives, four moderate Democrats already announced plans to step down. This week, seven-term Congressman Marion Berry became the 2nd House Democrat from Arkansas to announce his plan to retire rather than run for re-election in 2010. The lifelong farmer, who served as President Bill Clinton's agricultural advisor, was first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996.

Berry says he still can't get 1994 out of his mind, the year when Republicans gained 54 seats in the House of Representatives, sweeping to power there for the first time since 1954. Re-

publicans also seized the Senate, picking up eight seats and Alabama Democrat Richard Shelby switched parties to become a Republican.

Berry suggests that there are strong similarities to that period of time.

"There has not been this much turmoil in Arkansas politics in a long time," Berry told Agri-Pulse. "I would be afraid to predict anything. In the next few months, you could see all kinds of stuff coming down the pike."

Of course, Democrats aren't the only ones in hot water with voters, creating concerns that all incumbents up for re-election in 2010 could be in jeopardy. Even though approval ratings for the President and Democratic leaders are at extremely low levels, GOP lawmakers don't fair much better. They would need to pick up 41 seats in the House to regain a majority.

## So what's ahead?

With all of this turmoil, what can you expect in 2010? If the health care bill isn't dead, the current version is certainly on life support. The best bet for revival could come from conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats like Berry and Mike Ross (D-AR) who have often been able to work with Republicans. Berry is expected to offer a scaled down health care bill that tries to correct the nation's biggest health care problems, like dealing with pre-existing conditions, without taking an axe to the current system.

Cap and trade legislation also seems destined for retooling, perhaps in favor of a much broader energy bill focused on job creation.

"We will likely not do climate change this year, but will do an energy bill instead," emphasized Sen. Byron Dorgan during a recent speech. The North Dakota Democrat says he supports "fuel economy standard increases, moving toward electric drive transportation systems, renewable energy production, modern transmission grid, conservation, and efficiency" as part of U.S. energy policy.

Dorgan's assessment is that "in the aftermath of a very, very heavy lift on health care, I think it is unlikely that the Senate will turn next to the very complicated and very controversial subject of cap-and-trade climate change kind of legislation."

## Fight, fight, fight

Several Democratic party members expect the president to learn from the recent elections and hit the "reset" button on his far-reaching agenda. Independent voters are fleeing their party in droves. To get them back in the fold and re-energized, they expect him to move more toward the middle, focusing on bread and butter issues like jobs and the economy, just as Bill Clinton did after the Republican takeover of the House and Senate in 1994.

Yet, many other Democrats are pushing President Obama to charge ahead with a very liberal agenda – despite the recent Senate loss in Massachusetts, and losses in gubernatorial races in New Jersey and Virginia last fall. It's now or never, they reason, and if Democrats lose their majorities in 2010 it will be impossible to pass health care reform the following year. They want a fight to the finish, even if there is barely anyone left to take credit.

With all of these different voices within the Democratic party, the White House has been scrambling to develop the best political path forward, a job akin to tiptoeing through a minefield. And watching the debate unfold will be new Senator Scott Brown, undoubtedly smiling about how a little-known state senator, could cause such turmoil. Δ

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