

Messages from Massachusetts – What the Election Results Really Meant

By Joe Torella



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The recent special election to select, perhaps coronate, Senator Ted Kennedy's successor – a seat he held for half a century – offers some very powerful messages for Massachusetts and for the US.

First, one must respect what Ted Kennedy meant to the people of his state; appreciate his politics or not, he worked diligently from his heart for his constituency. He was their advocate; and when it came to health care, he took that role to the next level and spoke in a larger, more national voice. This is contextually important to the recent election because whether you believed or not in the healthcare approach taken by the Massachusetts legislature, it appeared that the electorate would/could forgive almost any hiccup in their home-grown system as long as Kennedy was there to make it work for them.

The reality: his 'single-payer-like experiment' in that State, although initially heralded by many, is now tied up in bureaucratic delays with significantly higher than projected spending. For those of you who follow my monthly articles, you know that another of my criticisms of the Massachusetts experiment came when the late Senator advocated a 'closed-system' but sought treatment outside of Massachusetts despite its best-in-class medical care. Such broad access is not an easily workable tenant in such models.

Despite these problems in Massachusetts, Kennedy would probably have been re-elected if he had survived his cancer. So, given Democratic dominance and legacy in that state, would anyone have

suspected that Republican Scott Brown could have beaten Democrat Martha Coakley? Given this unlikely outcome, the key question is: Did the voters know how their vote would impact the national healthcare debate?

I believe the answer is a resounding yes. And that's why the Senator's legacy has contextual importance. Given Democratic leadership in the White House, one might conclude that the Massachusetts voter had the opportunity to endorse Ted Kennedy's legacy and expand it nationally, but they didn't.

It's less likely, however, that the vote was a reflection of home state sentiment toward the Massachusetts plan; rather, voters knew their decision had implications for a national healthcare plan – the pendulum had swung too quickly and too wildly from center. I think the vote affirms that the American people, and surprisingly those in Massachusetts, recognize that a national healthcare solution needs to rest in the middle; not too far left or right.

President Obama's chief advisors overvalued the country's embracement of change in the White House and a four-year endorsement of Democratic leadership. The vote for change was aimed at the direction the Bush Administration was heading. It was not an endorsement to swing the pendulum to the far left; rather to address critical issues, especially healthcare, with a fairly balanced, bi-partisan solution.

Massachusetts voters, who may or may not like their state's healthcare system, knew that a Republican win would neutralize the 'rubber stamp' – essentially acknowledging that healthcare isn't perfect, but it's working

reasonably well for, and appreciated by most of those covered under the employer-based system. Throwing out what we know for an untested system, especially in financially uncertain times, would have been irresponsible.

The Massachusetts voters declared, we will not act irresponsibly and let the healthcare debate be fought and won on a partisan basis. That's a potent message from a Massachusetts vantage point. If reality suggests that 95% – or more than 200 million – Americans are satisfied with their healthcare, but accessibility and affordability can be improved, then the solution needs to be directed at the part of the system that isn't working. Dismantling the current system to secure a 'party' ideology will provide neither the solution we need nor a platform for return if/when it fails.

There is clearly a better way to achieve accessibility, affordability and coverage for all, especially the Uninsured, while keeping cost controls in place and an ever vigilant focus on quality. Unfortunately, some of the critical cross-needs that must be kept in mind when crafting a national solution have yet to be agreed to on a bi-partisan basis. If the solution is to be effective, we must see cooperation and compromise by both parties, not obstructionism by either. **FA**

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