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Q&A: A historic election hangs in the balance



Bruce Wallin discussing a previous election on New England Cable News. *Courtesy photo.*

January 18, 2010

Two Northeastern professors comment below on the issues that will decide Tuesday's dramatic election between Republican State Senator Scott Brown and his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley, to fill the U.S. Senate seat held by the late Edward M. Kennedy.

Dan Kennedy, Assistant Professor of Journalism, College of Arts and Sciences

Give us your assessment of who has made best use of free

and paid media and why.

Scott Brown has benefited from free media far more than Martha Coakley. To some extent he has been able to take advantage of the way news organizations operate. Even though he is a veteran state legislator, he's also a fresh face in comparison to Coakley. Thus we've seen more stories aimed at introducing Brown to the public, which invariably leads to a softer presentation.

Brown is also more telegenic and personable than Coakley. That has come through in the televised debates, even though he is also somewhat stiff and rambling.

Both Brown and Coakley have bought time for positive television commercials focusing on their biographies, and each candidate's spots have generally been fine. But Brown, with his emphasis on being the guy in the pickup truck, has gotten the better of it.

We're seeing more skeptical coverage of both candidates in the final days of the campaign. In particular, the Boston Globe has been tough on Brown's apparent unwillingness to be associated with a bill he filed several years ago that would have allowed hospitals and individual health-care workers to refuse emergency contraception for rape victims.

Who has won the battle of the attacks?

Last week, the Coakley campaign unveiled a negative ad about Brown that seemed to do her more harm than good. Even though it was accurate, it was also quite harsh, and it came across as a little desperate, given that her election is now in doubt. To make matters worse, the word "Massachusetts" was misspelled, and it was quickly pulled.

The Brown campaign gained more traction than one might have expected in its wounded outrage over the ad. Politics ain't beanbag, to quote an old phrase, and the reason politicians go negative is because it works. In this case, though, it may have backfired, since it punctured Coakley's own image as the inevitable winner, floating above the fray.

The Coakley campaign was also hurt by a hyperbolic flier sent out several days ago by the Democratic State Committee accusing Brown of wanting hospitals to "turn away" rape victims. It was an offensive distortion of Brown's position, and Coakley made a mistake by not distancing herself from it.

In the last week, the national media has really focused on this race. What elements make it such a high-profile story?

As I argued in my weekly column for The Guardian last Tuesday, the media have fallen in love with this story because it plays to the larger, overly simplistic narrative they have adopted: that the Obama presidency has failed, and that Democrats face an electoral catastrophe in the midterm elections this November.

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In fact, though this may be a particularly difficult moment for President Obama, his poll ratings have held up reasonably well, and surveys show congressional Republicans remain the most despised political class in America. Obviously, it is way too early to predict how the midterm elections will turn out.

Then, too, there is the drama of replacing the legendary Ted Kennedy in the Senate. The notion that a Republican who's vowed to kill health-care reform may succeed a man who made national health care his life's cause is in and of itself significant.

Poll results have also been intriguing enough for the race to become a legitimate national story. The latest polls put Brown slightly ahead. Ominously for Coakley, every poll I've seen shows that respondents who are most excited about the race are also the most likely to vote for Brown.

We also have no idea who is going to vote. Turnout in special elections is notoriously low. Still, the media have generated enough interest that we'll almost certainly see higher-than-normal turnout. The conventional wisdom would suggest that will help Coakley, but I'm not sure that's going to be true this time.

Who do you think will win?

I won't call this a prediction, because that suggests I'm confident of the outcome. At this point, I would not be surprised if either Coakley or Brown won. But my sense is that Coakley will squeak by thanks to the Democrats' superior get-out-the-vote machinery. President Obama's appearance at Northeastern on Sunday will help her as well — not because it turned Brown voters into Coakley supporters, but because it energized party activists.

Brown's inconsistent statements on access to abortion, his sneering references to constitutional rights for terrorism suspects and his ahistorical insistence that waterboarding isn't torture may start to catch up with him as well. Massachusetts may not be as liberal as its reputation, but it remains among the most liberal of states.

Bruce Wallin, Associate Professor of Political Science, College of Arts and Sciences

What factors have turned this from an expected win for Coakley to a very close election that could go either way?

What first made it closer than expected is the same phenomenon that got William Weld and Mitt Romney elected governor here in Massachusetts: the "likeability" factor, or what the media often refers to as the "who-would-you-rather-have-a-beer-with" factor; that, plus complacency early on by the Coakley campaign.

What's made it close since is that, as soon as there was poll data showing Brown closing the gap, it energized the Republican Party and its supporters. With Obama's popularity numbers slipping and national health-care reform a huge and poorly understood bill hanging on one vote in the Senate, many interest groups as well as the Republican Party see this as a tremendous opportunity to not only derail health-care reform in Washington, but re-energize the Republican Party.

What substantive issues have gotten traction, if any, and in whose favor?

Health-care reform is obviously a big issue, but it's really been cloaked in "anti-tax" and "anti-big government" rhetoric, traditional Republican issues. I think that is resonating with independents as well as Republicans.

The negative campaigning, especially on behalf of Coakley, could be called a substantive issue itself, at least in a campaign sense. Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey's gubernatorial campaign suffered from her negative attacks in 2006 against eventual winner Deval Patrick.

Any sense that a lot of independents will vote for Brown to send the president a message? How seriously would a Brown victory derail President Obama's agenda?

I think most independents will make their decision based on their perceptions of the candidates, and perhaps partly on the anti-tax and anti-big government message that Brown is using against health-care reform. But I don't see [Brown votes] as aimed at Obama, just as I've never believed voters in Massachusetts elected Republican governors to balance the overwhelmingly Democratic state legislature. Voters vote for someone they like, for the most part.

Obviously, Brown's election would change the way health-care reform would be passed. But Republicans can't just keep being the party of "no."

Who do you think will win?

The only sure winner is the local media! I guess it comes down to how hard the Democratic machine works.

