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GOP victory in Massachusetts: Will it matter here?

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Thursday, Jan. 21 2010

WASHINGTON — A day after a stunning election upset in Massachusetts, the GOP Senate victory emerged as a political inkblot test in Missouri and Illinois.

Both parties, facing critical races in each state, were seeing, or at least spinning, what they want from the contest.

GOP leaders on Wednesday called Scott Brown's victory Tuesday over Democrat Martha Coakley a clear repudiation of Democratic positions on health care and other issues. But some Democrats said the long-shot victory by Brown — a state senator who lacked a national profile — had much more to do with his status as a Washington outsider.

In Missouri, the race expected to feel the most impact is the epic Senate showdown between Secretary of State Robin Carnahan, a Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Roy Blunt, R-Springfield. The pair are competing to replace Republican U.S. Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, who is retiring.

Carnahan's older brother, U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, could also feel blowback from his party's loss in the Bay State. So could, to a lesser extent, candidates in the U.S. Senate race in Illinois.

Illinois, Obama's home state, is considered safe Democratic territory — but so was Massachusetts, until this week.

"There is right now a great deal of unfocused rage among voters," said Roy Temple, a veteran Democratic strategist in Missouri and Washington. "They are incredibly frustrated about what's going on in their lives and that the political system does not seem to be addressing that. The winners in 2010 will be those that manage that anger."

NO COATTAILS, NO COMFORT

This much is clear: The Massachusetts race serves as a splash of cold water to Democrats who thought that, after Barack Obama's convincing victory in 2008, they could ride the president's coattails for a prolonged period of political comfort. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs called the election "a wake-up call for everybody" in Washington.

An exit survey of Massachusetts voters by the Republican firm of Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates found that while 43 percent said they voted to support Brown, even more, 46 percent, said they cast their Republican vote to send a message to Washington.

"What happened in this election," Brown said in his victory speech Tuesday night, "can happen all over America."

Can it?

Whether the lessons of the Massachusetts race will still be relevant in November remains to be seen, said Dave Robertson, professor of political science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. For the moment, though, Republicans have gained a few key footholds.

Some Democrats on the fence about staying on Capitol Hill may opt against seeking another term, providing fertile ground for a GOP challenge. Those Republicans already fighting in Democratic districts could find it easier to raise money. Republicans may also recruit stronger candidates buoyed by Brown's win, Robertson said.

"This election gives incumbents and challengers in congressional and state legislative races strong, hard evidence that voters are very unhappy with the direction of the country and its government," Robertson said.

Where the analysis gets murky is what the Massachusetts election portends for Blunt and Robin Carnahan.

Blunt and Missouri Republicans have sought to connect Carnahan to positions Democrats have taken in Washington on health care and economic issues, a strategy that worked in Brown's defeat of Coakley.

"Scott Brown's victory put Robin Carnahan on notice," said Lloyd Smith,

executive director of the Missouri Republican Party.

But Blunt, unlike Brown, is hardly a Washington outsider. Blunt has been on Capitol Hill since 1997, including turns as party whip and acting majority leader.

Carnahan's campaign has already sought to undermine any bump Blunt may get from Massachusetts by painting him as "part of the problem in Washington." Look for that push to intensify as Election Day approaches.

"The people of Massachusetts had a choice, and they voted against the establishment candidate," Carnahan campaign spokesman Linden Zakula said. "Missourians will get a chance to vote against the establishment candidate here, too."

Blunt, in an interview, rejected that notion: "If we want this to be about Washington addresses, Robin Carnahan has had several, her brother has had several, her mother has had several. I think that's an argument that Missourians will see through pretty quickly."

Carnahan's brother Russ, seeking his fourth term on Capitol Hill, is running against Republican lawyer Ed Martin, who watched the Massachusetts race results come in with supporters at a tavern in Brentwood.

If a Republican can win Ted Kennedy's old seat, Martin said, Dick Gephardt's St. Louis district could also be a toss-up.

"What we saw in Massachusetts, as dark blue state as there is, makes me and my supporters realize that the 3rd Congressional District is really up for grabs," Martin said.

Voters are anxious, Russ Carnahan acknowledged in an interview, but their ire is directed at both parties. He pointed to an NBC-Wall Street Journal poll released this week showing that 64 percent of voters nationwide disapprove of Republicans' handling of health care reform, even more than the 55 percent who disapprove of the way Obama has handled the overhaul.

"I don't need Massachusetts voters to tell me that voters are worried about the economy and worried about health care," Carnahan said.

ILLINOIS PRIMARIES AHEAD

In Illinois, which will conduct primaries for Obama's old Senate seat and every statewide office in two weeks, the Massachusetts results were greeted with the expected exuberance from Republicans and shrugs from Democrats.

The Democrat selected to run against the likely GOP Senate candidate, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, from the Chicago suburbs, no doubt will emphasize Kirk's five terms in Congress.

But it's unclear whether it will have a real political impact. Chris Mooney, political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said Illinois Democrats in general might have to worry about the image of partywide complacency and sense of entitlement that has hurt the party in Massachusetts.

"Certainly it's going to put the fear of God into Democrats and incumbents," said Mooney. "You have a bad economy, and in Illinois you have the extra bonus that state government is just falling apart" under an \$11 billion state budget deficit and infighting among Democratic leaders.

Still, for the candidates who do make it to November in Illinois and elsewhere, there is plenty of time to learn from the lessons of Massachusetts. The difference, said Robertson, the UMSL professor, is which campaign adapts best.

"Good political campaigns, like good pitcher-batter duels in baseball, involve constant mutual adjustments," Robertson said. "We don't know how everyone will adjust to the Massachusetts election, but we know they will."

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