WHERE INDEPENDENTS HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE: THE CASE OF MASSACHUSETTS

By Paul Watanabe

This year's bitterly contested Massachusetts Democratic gubernatorial primary was enlivened on several occasions by controversial comments from the lips of first-time candidate John Silber, President of Boston University. In speeches and debates, the combative Silber delivered remarks regarded as critical of and insensitive toward Cambodian refugee immigrants, feminists, unwed mothers receiving public assistance, the elderly, and residents of the section of Boston with the largest non-white population. The press immediately dubbed these statements "Silber shockers."

The Biggest Shocker of All

Silber, who described himself as "the outsider the insiders fear," was pitted in the primary against Francis Bellotti, a popular former Attorney General and a fixture for decades on the Democratic scene, and Evelyn Murphy, the state's Lieutenant Governor. Silber was the last to declare his candidacy, immediately facing resistance from most of the party leaders who were put off by his conservatism and general disagreement with the party. He, for example, twice voted for Ronald Reagan. Another major hurdle for Silber was securing a place on the primary ballot. To do so, he had to gain the support of 15% of the Democratic state convention delegates — which he finally did, barely.

On election eve, poll results showed Silber trailing Bellotti (Murphy dropped out of the race just before the final week). A Boston Herald/WCVB-TV poll by Bannon Research had Silber behind by 14 points. The Boston Globe/WBZ-TV poll by KRC Communications Research reported an 11 point Bellotti bulge. It was little wonder, therefore, that Silber, like virtually every candidate who appears in deep trouble, conjured up the image of Truman knocking off Dewey to rally his troops on the campaign's final stop. Twenty-four hours later, Silber had pulled off the ultimate "shocker", a stunning 10 point victory over Bellotti.

Weld Wins

On the Republican side, William Weld, a former Assistant Attorney General in the Reagan administration and a United States Attorney in Boston, faced an arduous battle against Steven Pierce, the Minority Leader of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Pierce won the Republican party's endorsement at the state convention. Party leaders urged Weld to forego the gubernatorial primary and instead run, as he had once before, for Attorney General — an offer he declined (Weld ran against Bellotti in 1978 and lost by about a million votes).

Throughout most of the summer, Weld routinely trailed Pierce in the polls by 20 to 25 points. The final week of the campaign, however, saw Pierce's once formidable lead vanish. By election day, the Boston Herald called the contest a "cliffhanger" and "too close to call." Weld completed his remarkable comeback by winning the primary 60% to 40%.

Independents and "The Myth of the Independent Voter"

Explanations for Silber's success and Weld's turnaround focused on the role of the massive number of Massachusetts voters registered as independents — who are permitted by state law to select either party's ballot in primary elections. At the time of this year's primaries, more voters were registered as independents than at any other time in the state's history, 1,351,965 or 44% of the registered electorate. Democrats, traditionally the largest group, totaled 1,324,601 or 43%, while Republicans lagged far behind at 412,282 or 13%. The rise in the number of independents has been swift. In the half year prior to the primaries, 66,184 voters shifted from the Democratic line and 12,158 from Republican to independent. Campaign analysts and strategists realized therefore prior to the election that there was a "third force" with numbers sufficient to make a profound difference in both party primaries. But there was still considerable doubt that independents would have a decisive impact on the outcomes.

In a piece that appeared just prior to the primaries on "The Myth of the Independent Voter," the Globe's Chris Black reflected the prevailing scholarly and political wisdom. "Can independents—the largest single group of voters in Massachusetts—make up the deficit for Democrat John Silber? Will they sweep into the Republican primary and boost the fortunes of William Weld?," Black asked. His answer: "Don't count on it. The power and influence of independent voters is greatly exaggerated. History and recent elections belie the myth of the voter who disdains party affiliation, carefully weighs the issues, votes the man (or woman) and not the party, and makes a deliberate, sober, careful choice on election day. While intelligent, informed and politically active independent voters do exist, the great majority are largely uninformed, uninterested and uninvolved....independents are rarely stirred to political action."

Some believed that Silber this year did have a reservoir of independent support that was largely hidden,

not registering in the polls. The brash and angry B.U. president, some argued, was a typical anti-establishment, protest candidate—a type which has been known on occasion to do considerably better on election day than in pre-election polling. If a hidden vote did exist, independents were thought to constitute a large part of it. Still, the consensus was, as one analyst put it, that "the history of hidden votes is that they stay out of sight on Election Day, too."

Out of Hiding

Independents were certainly not hidden on election day. Their turnout matched that of the partisans. Overall turnout was just shy of 50%. The large contingent of independent voters was drawn to both party contests. An exit poll for the Boston Herald by the Roper Elections Service indicated that a whopping 48% of Republican primary voters were registered as independents. The Boston Globe/WBZ-TV exit poll placed the proportion at 50%. Forty-three percent of participants in the Democratic primary, according to the Herald poll, were independents.

Silber's victory on the Democratic side was directly attributable to independents. They voted for him over Bellotti by a margin of over 2-1 (68% for Silber, 29% for Bellotti, according to the Herald exit poll). Registered Democrats, on the other hand, favored Bellotti by 60% to Silber's 38%. If left up to the partisans, there is little doubt that Bellotti would have been the nominee.

Analysts, veteran politicians, and the candidates themselves agreed that the independents were decisive in the Democratic race. Francis Bellotti, for example, said after the election that Independents brought him down. Unsurprisingly, he was not pleased with the role played by unaffiliated voters. "They have no commitment to a party," Bellotti remarked. "They only come out in droves when they want to protest." Robert Crane, the state treasurer, who chose not to run for reelection after serving for over two decades, explained Silber's triumph in similar terms: "The movement was on and the independents came out and they wanted a change."

Weld's success in the end did not rely as much on direct independent support. He did very well among independents: two-thirds of those voting chose him over Pierce. Weld also demonstrated unexpected strength, however, among registered Republicans, who went for him solidly.

Keeping Options Open and Sending a Message

Massachusetts politics is now a contentious and unsettled environment. Large segments of the electorate are angry and frustrated over the state's fiscal and economic crisis. The Dukakis administration, the legislature, and the established leadership in both parties felt the sting of this widespread dissatisfaction. The growth in independents, we now realize, was a clear sign that a sizeable portion of the electorate was serious about change.

Voters sent the candidates and parties some unmistakable messages. Half of the voters in the Democratic primary interviewed in the Herald exit poll, including one-fourth of registered Democrats, said, for example, that the Democratic party's long reign as the dominant force in Massachusetts politics was a "bad thing." Three fourths of those who shared this view backed Silber. Little wonder that at the traditional Massachusetts Democratic Party unity breakfast held the morning after the election, the nominee proclaimed: "My nomination clearly indicates I am the leader of the new Massachusetts Democratic Party."

Perhaps the clearest indication that Massachusetts independents are comfortable for now with their status were the reports from polling places throughout the state that primary voters were opting to reregister as independents in unprecedented numbers immediately after casting their ballots. In Massachusetts, voters are automatically registered as Democrats or Republicans by voting in a party primary. They can change their affiliation immediately after voting by filling out a 3x5 inch card indicating their new choice. Several locations needed to have their supply of registration cards replenished several times throughout election day. In some places, angry exchanges accompanied the news that due to the run on the reregistration forms some voters would be obliged to delay, if only briefly, their renewed declaration of independence.

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