Loss in Massachusetts Throws National Agenda into Turmoil

With Scott Brown’s (R) upset victory over Martha Coakley (D) complete, a major wrench has been thrown into Democratic plans for a continued aggressive national agenda. The once-shocking result, which became a near certainty in the last days of the special election campaign for Ted Kennedy’s Senate seat, has thrown official Washington into a tizzy, but despite the bold public pronouncements coming from both sides, only time will tell what the true repercussions might be.

Implications for Geography

It is difficult for me to gauge the precise impact on legislation and policy topics of interest to geographers, but let me give it a shot. First off, I do expect the Democrats to try to find some way to deal with healthcare reform. President Obama has invested too much time and political capital in the issue to give up now – and there are still a few doors open to him. The Democrats could attempt to forge a deal with Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and/or a few other moderate Republicans that would give them back the crucial 60th vote needed to break Senate filibusters. Or, perhaps more controversially, the Democrats could attempt to use the federal budget process – called reconciliation – to pass some healthcare changes. This would require only 51 votes, but it would limit the reach of reform, take some time, and could prove politically dangerous.

Once healthcare is done, there are multiple topics Congress could turn its attention to – including at least three of importance to geography: federal appropriations (which would likely be led by increases for scientific research), a reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB – hopefully involving a mandate for geography education), or energy legislation (which encompasses climate change).

My sense is that the last of these is the most endangered by the Massachusetts result. Many moderate Democrats were already starting to push back against the President’s ambitious climate change agenda, and there seems to be limited will left to focus on a bold energy agenda – including serious reforms aimed at curbing climate change. As I noted in my July/August 2009 column, the House last year passed an aggressive bill that was based on a system called cap-and-trade, which forces greenhouse gas producers to either reduce emissions or fund projects that are aimed at similar purposes. While this bill was hailed by many in the scientific community, it became the subject of Republican attack ads – and many Democrats in moderate House districts could pay a price for their vote in this year’s Congressional elections.

There is no doubt that at some point, Congress will focus on the annual appropriations process, and this could bring good news for researchers. The Obama Administration will release its FY 2011 federal budget proposal in early February, and the expectation is that the document will request significant increases for the research agencies. Additionally, the House Science Committee just began hearings about the need to reauthorize the America COMPETES Act – which was signed into law by President Bush in 2007, gave momentum to major increases in the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) budget, and calls for significant funding for science and math education.

This last aim of COMPETES goes hand-in-hand with a possible reauthorization of the NCLB legislation. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has asserted that No Child is his top priority for 2010 and that the Administration will be focused on the topic. This could be good news for our discipline – as several members have heard our calls for dedicated funding in the law for geography education and we now have several friends on Capitol Hill. Still, a reauthorization would be handled by some of the same Congressional Committees that have been dealing with healthcare reform and it could test weary members of the House and Senate.

We should learn more about the direction of the national agenda in the next several weeks – and certainly by March much will be sorted out. Stay tuned!

Reminder: Consider Visiting the Hill during Annual Meeting!

As a follow-up to the final item in my January column, I again wanted to encourage AAG members coming to Washington in April for the annual meeting to consider taking a bit of time while you are in town to visit your members of Congress. As discussed above, there are multiple issues pending that will have great impact on geography research and education and it would certainly help address their needs if members of Congress hear from their constituents that geography is a discipline that is crucial to today’s world, and worthy of federal support.

To this end, if you would like to meet with the offices of your Senator or member of Congress, please do not hesitate to contact me jwertman@aag.org and I will gladly offer advice about your delegation and tips for visiting the hill. We hope to see you in April! ■

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