

Massachusetts Republicans: The 2004 Challenge to Democratic Legislative Hegemony

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Abstract

This paper studies the electoral challenge the Massachusetts Republican Party mounted in 2004 to Democratic Party dominance of the state legislature. Since Republicans won so few seats the dependent variable is the percent of the two party vote the Republican garnered in each district. District level independent variables include the percent of Independent voters in the district, the percent candidate Mitt Romney received in the district in 2002, and whether or not the district had an open seat. Candidate level variables are candidate experience and percent of the money raised by the two parties in the district. The only statistically significant variables are Romney vote in 2002 and percent of money raised.

Introduction

Incumbents are overwhelmingly more likely to win state legislative elections than are their challengers (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Hogan 2004; Tucker and Weber 1987; Van Dunk 1997). As Peverill Squire (2000) remarked in his study on uncontested seats for state legislatures, contested elections are essential to democratic theories of the accountability of elected officials to their constituents. Both of these factors loomed in Massachusetts in 2004 as the minority Republicans mounted a substantial challenge to legislative Democrats for the first time in years. Yet the promise of electoral competitiveness foundered.

This analysis gauges the influence of factors at the levels of district politics and candidate quality in assessing the difficulties faced by the Republican challengers. Though some studies have used dependent variables of election result and percent of vote received (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Hogan 2004; Van Dunk 1997), Republican non-incumbents won so few seats that this study will use only percent of the vote in the district. The Republican Party fielded candidates throughout the state but focused attention on districts with large numbers of Independent (known in Massachusetts as “unenrolled”) voters and districts where Republican gubernatorial candidate Mitt Romney had run well in 2002 (Foley 2005). Therefore, un-enrolled registration in the district and the percent of district votes garnered by Romney in 2002 will serve as independent variables in this study. Past studies have shown partisan makeup of a district to be an important measure of candidate success (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). But because only 13% of Massachusetts voters are registered as Republican, the party has pegged its hopes on appealing to unenrolled voters, who makeup 49% of Massachusetts voters (Foley 2005). There is also a question as to the inexperience of the candidates as a measure of candidate quality. In this study candidate quality is represented by two means: level of political experience of the challenger (Van Dunk 1997) and percentage of two party money that was raised by the Republican candidate (Hogan 2004). Because challengers should do better where an open seat exists the open seat variable considers whether the Republican had an open seat district or had to face an incumbent.

The Challenge of Challenging in Massachusetts

The Democratic Party has attained a level of dominance in the Massachusetts legislature that can only be described as hegemonic. Since the election of 1948, the house has been out of Democratic Party control for only two years, from 1953-1955. Democrats took the senate from the Republican Party in the 1958 election and have held it ever since. Yet the Republican Party controlled the governorship in four elections from 1990 through 2002, finally ceding the

office in the 2006 election. Even while controlling the executive position the Republicans made little headway in the legislature. In only one two year legislative term, 1991-1993, were there enough Republicans in either branch, in that case the senate, to uphold a gubernatorial veto. Republican governors have had their policy wins but have also experienced the frustration of routine Democratic overrides of their vetoes. Democratic legislative leaders fashioned themselves as co-governors.

The 2004 legislative election saw two sources of challenge to Democratic dominance. First, Republican Governor Mitt Romney determined to rebuild the moribund challenger base of his party and field as many candidates as possible. Second, the controversy over same-sex marriage was at its peak in the early part of the year as the legislature wrangled over its response to the court decision legalizing gay marriage. These factors raised the possibility of the Republicans winning seats.

The Republican dominance of the “corner office” for four terms since 1990 came in part as Massachusetts voters considered Republicans as a check on the Democratic legislature. The commonwealth had four Republican governors from 1991-2007: William Weld, Paul Cellucci, Jane Swift, and Mitt Romney. Swift served as “acting governor,” having moved up from lieutenant governor when Governor Cellucci resigned midterm. Cellucci had made a similar move upon the departure of Weld, and then Cellucci won a term outright in the 1998 election. Each Republican victor made much of the “mess on Beacon Hill.” Gubernatorial candidate Mitt Romney prospered during his campaign against Treasurer Shannon O’Brien by depicting her as a Democratic insider, one of a “Gang of Three” including Senate President Robert Travaglini and Speaker Thomas Finneran, a triumvirate that would lord over the overtaxed citizenry should the Democratic candidate prevail.

Republican governors employed varied strategies to confront Democratic dominance. The year 1990 was a “throw the bums out” kind of election and the

voters identified enough Democratic bums to give Governor Weld sufficient Republicans to sustain a veto in the senate. Weld also pivoted from his campaign manner of confrontation toward Democratic legislators and learned to cooperate for mutual advantage. His intelligence and quirky style made him popular in the state and enabled cordial relations with legislative leaders. Yet the veto-proof senate lasted only two years. If Governor Weld found policy making with the Democrats a challenge, Governor Cellucci, a well-liked former state senator, found it frustrating. Acting Governor Swift was another former senator respected by her ex-colleagues, but she suffered any number of self-inflicted political wounds and was ineffective. Mitt Romney forced her from the 2002 electoral landscape.

The 2002 election was not a “throw the bums out” election. Governor Romney took office with only 23 Republicans in the 160 member House and six Republicans in the 40 member senate. Nor did he find the Democrats agreeable partners in policy. Instead, he maintained his confrontational style and grew frustrated as the Democrats pushed back. Unlike his gubernatorial predecessors, Romney determined to exert electoral pressure on the Democrats to augment his power in the State House and perhaps enhance his prospects for a run at the presidency (Barone and Cohen 2003, 773).

On May 25, 2004 Governor Romney hosted a celebratory unveiling of 131 Republican candidates for the state legislature, dubbing them his “Reform Team.” (The total included incumbents and some who would be facing off in the Republican primary). As accounts in the *Lowell Sun* and *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* of May 26, 2004 recounted, the governor remarked: “If you want real change and real reform you have to have competition. We have to do something different in November. We have to bring the ‘R’ to mean not just Republican but reform.” The governor continued, “We’re a party that’s going to fight hard; we’re going to fight back. We’re not going to be intimidated.”

Challengers in any state are hard pressed to defeat incumbent state legislators. The difficulties are heightened when facing an incumbent from a highly professionalized legislature (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Carey, et al. 2000). Carey, et al. presented a composite index of professionalism that included operating budgets, days in session, and legislator's salary, and applied their formula to 96 state legislative chambers in 49 states based on data from the 1992-1994 election cycle. Considering salary only (which these scholars argue is the most meaningful variable), the Massachusetts legislature ranked as the ninth most professional legislature. Carey, et al. also found the incumbency advantage imposing here—it portends a 98% re-election rate for Massachusetts incumbents.

Hogan (2001) included Massachusetts in an eight state study of challenger emergence in the face of incumbents' war chest advantages. He presented data on the percent of challenges in primaries and general elections in both mid-term (1994 for the other seven states and 1998 for Massachusetts, due to a quirk in Massachusetts's redistricting schedule) and the 1996 presidential election year. In general elections in both off year and presidential election years, Massachusetts had far and away the fewest challenges—only 25% in the mid-term and 26% in the presidential year. Only two other states fell below 50% challenged districts in general elections. The averages were 61% for the mid-term and 64% in the general. A 37 state study by Lublin and McDonald (2006) found Massachusetts near the bottom in percent of districts contested by the two major parties in 2000, with only 29% of districts featuring partisan contests. Even in 2004 Massachusetts, with 51% of legislative seats contested by the major parties, was only tied for 24th among the states studied. In both 2000 and 2004 Massachusetts was distinguished by having the least percentage of competitive races in the nation, where competitive is accepted as any district where the winner prevailed with less than 60% of the two party vote. In 2000, 7% of contested races were competitive; in 2004 only 8% were competitive (Lublin and McDonald 2006).

The advantages of Massachusetts's incumbents do not stop there. Hogan also looked at average spending in gross and by voter by incumbents and challengers. The data for Massachusetts shows that incumbents on average spent \$30,838 to \$12,808 for challengers, or \$1.06 to \$0.44 per eligible voter. Challengers were able to match 42% of incumbent spending, marginally the lowest among the eight states studied. But Hogan was especially concerned in his study with the effect of campaign war chests in deterring challenges. He looked at war chests on December 31 of the year before the election year. By this measure, Massachusetts incumbents enjoyed a large and intimidating advantage: they started the election year with an average of \$13,496 ready, a per eligible voter amount of \$0.46 per voter. This per voter amount was far larger than that available in any other state studied (Hogan 2001).

Incumbency, professionalism, campaign fund raising advantages, and war chests have all been recognized as presenting severe disadvantages to challengers, and they have undoubtedly contributed to the difficulty of the Republicans' inability to run winning candidates in Massachusetts. Yet the Republicans [GOP] ran in 2004 on the premise of attracting votes from unenrolled voters and where Governor Romney had done well. Although the party recruited a large number of candidates, the question might be one of running the right candidates in the right districts.

Data and Methods

This study focuses upon 72 non-incumbent Republicans seeking house seats and 23 non-incumbent Republicans seeking senate seats. Throughout this paper, two house races are excluded. In the first contest a well financed and experienced Republican held the seat of a retiring Republican with 63% of the vote. The Democrats did not seriously contest the race, and the omission here is to improve the fit of the data. Yet it remains important to acknowledge that Republicans can hold open seats previously held by the GOP. Another race was dropped for insufficient data.

For each of these candidates data has been collected that relates to the district characteristics of unenrolled registration, the percent of the vote Governor Romney attained in the district in 2002, and whether the challenge was conducted against an incumbent or for an open seat. These figures serve as district level independent variables. Such information is available from the office of the secretary of state. There are also two independent variables that represent candidate quality. The first relates to experience and is a composite of three separate pieces of information: whether the candidate had run for legislative office before, was holding elective office in 2004, or had held elective office previously. If the answer to any of those factors is positive the candidate is considered to be a quality candidate for experience. Unlike the other variables at use here experience was not available from government sources. It was compiled by a questionnaire that was mailed to all candidates in 2004, by research into candidate web sites and the web sites of interest groups, and from newspaper accounts.

In some cases, information could not be obtained—some candidates were of such low quality that it seems they left no footprints in the sand. The second independent variable having to do with candidate quality is money. If the Republican was able to raise forty percent or more of the two party fund raising total in the district the candidate is considered to be of quality. Fundraising figures must be filed with the state Office of Political and Campaign Finance and are available to the public. Finally, the dependent variable for this study will be the percentage of the vote received by the challenger (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Hogan 2004; Van Dunk 1997). This information can also be obtained from the office of the Secretary of State. Before proceeding to examining the impact of the independent variables on the vote totals, there is some information that can flesh out what candidate quality might mean.

Candidate Quality

The first indicator of candidate quality is experience. A candidate who has held public office or run for the state legislature previously should have some advantages in knowing how to operate a campaign, how to represent him or her self as a candidate, raise money, build name recognition in the district and attract supporters (Berkman and Eisenstein 1999). Table 1 presents frequencies for non-incumbent Republicans who ran in the 2004 general election for whether they had run for the legislature before, held office in 2004, or had previously held office, and a composite of all those factors.

Table 1
Republican challenger experience

Experience	N	Yes	No
Run for legislature before	95	25%	75%
Held elective office 2004	73	29%	71%
Held elective office previously	37	38%	62%
Composite	95	40%	60%

In their study of non-incumbents who decide to run for state legislature in eight states Moncrief, Squire and Jewell found that most candidates are “novices.” Seventy-six percent had not run for state legislature before; only 25% held elective office at the time they ran for the legislature (Moncrief, et al. 2001, 36). In a 10 state study, Van Dunk used as a measure of candidate quality whether the candidate had ever held elective office and found an average of 24% of races in which an incumbent had a quality challenger. (Van Dunk 1997).

As Table 1 indicates, the 2004 Massachusetts Republican challengers were novices in terms of having run for legislature before, but a composite of three experience factors found the challengers relatively seasoned. Twenty-five percent of candidates had run for state legislature before, 29% held elective office in 2004. Thirty-eight percent had held elective office previously. The variable to be used in analyzing district and candidate factors on vote percent is to be the composite, a relatively generous measure.

In order to test a number of factors relating to the 2004 legislative elections, I mailed detailed questionnaires to all candidates for the state legislature from both major parties. In Table 2 we have responses from 42 defeated Republicans (41 responses for the name recognition and ability to run a campaign questions) and 51 re-elected Democrats asked to self-assess their campaign abilities.

Table 2
Candidate Self Assessment

Capability	Republicans			Democrats			
	Low	Fair	High	Low	Fair	High	
NameRec	32%	54%	14%	0%	29%	71%	
AbRun		15%	58%	27%	0%	24%	76%
PubSp	0%	44%	56%	2%	37%	61%	
FundAb	36%	47%	17%	4%	69%	27%	

NameRec = name recognition; AbRun = ability to run campaign;
PubSp = public speaking ability; FundAb = fund raising ability

Unsurprisingly, Republican challengers were at a disadvantage against incumbent Democrats. State legislative elections are low information affairs (Hogan, 2004), and almost a third of Republicans felt they had low name recognition while only 15% had high name recognition. Contrast the incumbents: no Democrat responded low name recognition, and over 70% responded high. Democrats also reported much more confidence in their ability to run their own campaigns and raise money. Only in public speaking did Republicans feel roughly as confident as their incumbent opponents. The lack of experience of Republican candidates is reflected in their self-assessments.

As for candidate quality by fundraising ability, I accept capacity to raise 40% of the money raised by the two parties in 2004 as an indicator of quality. By that measure, 72% of the Republican non-incumbents were low quality and 28% were high quality. When we combine the two measures of candidate quality—experience and the ability to raise 40% of the money in the district -- the results are daunting for the Republican effort. Only nine of the Republican non-incumbent candidates passed a combination of the two measures.

In order to test further for candidate quality, I examined the most competitive races in the fall. By October 15, the *Boston Globe* reported that professionals in both parties considered only 16 races (eight each in the house and senate) as competitive. I have recast that perception slightly to assess seven senate and seven house races, dropping a Republican incumbent from both the house and senate. The district factors in the competitive races should have been encouraging for the Republicans. Un-enrolled voters ranged from 55% to 60% in every district and Romney had ranged from a low of 49% to a high of 64% in the selected districts. Yet candidate characteristics were not as encouraging. Table 3 reflects the real numbers for those fourteen races for a number of categories.

Table 3
“Hot” races

Variable	Yes	No
Run for legislature before	6	8
Hold elective office in 2004	4	8
Held elective office previously	4	5
Experience composite	7	7
Quality by Money	8	6
Quality Experience and Money	2	12

About half of the candidates in hotly contested races were of quality by experience and eight of them raised sufficient money to be competitive. But there was little to be said for combining these qualities; only two of the candidates were of high quality by both experience and money. There were four open seats among these races for the senate but only one candidate was of high quality by experience and he raised only 19% of the funds raised between the major party candidates. The other three had never run for anything before and two of them moved into their districts only to run; each of those three essentially self-financed their own campaigns. In the house there were two open seats. One of those was held by a retiring Republican legislator and the party held the seat with a well experienced and financed candidate. The second open seat candidate lacked experience but raised 56% of the money in the district yet still lost by two percent.

Electoral Outcome

Republican non-incumbents won only one seat, holding a district the party had represented. Table 4 presents the results of the relationship of the dependent variable Results '04 as the percent of the two party vote captured by

the Republican and the independent district variables of percent of unenrolled voters, percent of Romney vote in '02, and open seat, and the candidate variables of experience (by composite) and Rep\$, percent of money raised by the Republican.

Table 4
District and candidate variables on Republican percent of vote

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	3.752	5.445	0.689	0.493	
Romney '02	0.512	0.066	0.606	7.776	0.000*
Un-enrolled	0.018	0.098	0.015	0.187	0.852
Open seat	-1.910	1.583	0.077	-1.206	0.231
Rep\$%	0.166	0.029	0.375	5.649	0.000*
Experience	0.672	1.145	0.039	0.587	0.559

*p < .001; R² = 0.674; Adjusted R² = .0655

The adjusted R² was .655 and indicates that that this model explains about 66% of the variance in the challenger's percent of the vote. An F test confirms the significance of the model.

Only two of the independent variables, the Romney vote percentage in the district, in 2002, and the percentage of money raised by the Republican in the district, were shown to be statistically significant. The best single predictor in

this model of the 2004 Republican vote percentage in the district is Romney's vote percentage in 2002. We would expect a one percent increase in Romney '02 would yield a 0.512 increase in the predicted Results '04. The only other statistically significant independent variable is Rep\$. A one percent increase in Rep\$ would yield a .17 percent increase in the predicted Results '04.

None of the other three independent variables had a statistically significant relationship to the 2004 vote percentage, due to multicollinearity. Although the GOP strategy called for a focus on districts with high numbers of unenrolled voters, that variable had little effect in any model run with Romney '02. There was a statistically significant correlation between Romney '02 and percent of unenrolled voters. While Van Dunk (1997) showed in her ten-state study that candidate experience was a statistically significant factor and the definition in use here is more generous, the variable was not significant in this discrete one state study focused on a particular year. Although Berkman and Eisenstein (1999) suggest in their study of state legislators as congressional candidates that experienced candidates should be better at raising money, no statistically significant relationship was found between experience and fund raising ability in this study. There were only twelve open seats in this study of ninety-five districts, and Republicans held one seat (plus the one not competitively contested by the Democrats) but the variable was not statistically significant.

Discussion

This paper has examined the influence of district and candidate level factors on an effort by Massachusetts Republicans to build their numbers in the legislature in 2004. The party had some success in reviving its base of candidates in a state where incumbent Democrats rarely face a challenge. Yet when we consider the vote received by Republican candidates the influence of factors depended upon by the Republican Party proved to be quite small.

Previous studies of legislative challengers have shown that quality candidates are strategic—they are rational actors who examine the vulnerability of incumbents before launching a challenge (Berkman and Eisenstein 1999; Pritchard 1992; Van Dunk 1997). But in Massachusetts in 2004, the GOP favored quantity over quality. This paid off in media attention and even in some anxiety among Democrats (Foley 2005) but failed at the polls. Candidate quality by experience had little impact on the GOP vote share in the 2004 races. The Massachusetts Republican Party intended to run as many candidates as possible in order to build their challenger base (Foley 2005). Yet of 24 senate seats challenged in 2004 only nine were challenged in 2006, with just one holdover candidate. Only 20 of 74 house districts were subjected to another challenge in 2006 with only eight holdover candidates.

Consistent with studies (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Van Dunk 1997) that show the ability to attract money is an important factor for a challenger, the ability to fund raise had an impact in Massachusetts. Unfortunately for Republicans only 28% of their candidates were able to raise a competitive amount of the district money. This incapacity was apparent in one enticing senate district: it was an open seat previously held by a Republican, the candidate was experienced, unenrolled and Romney vote both stood at 60%, but the candidate raised only 19% of the district money—and still was competitive, with 43% percent of the vote.

Of the 12 open seats, three in the house and one in the senate had been held by a Republican. Only one Republican had both experience and money as quality indicators, and he won handily. Four of the 12 were competitive. One weakness is that the Republicans had not fielded candidates in 2002 in the districts that became open in 2004. It would be folly for Republicans to let open seats go without serious contests. As Carey, et al. (2000) argue concerning incumbency and prospects for reelection, “even in districts that in terms of demographics and electoral trends ought to be partisan toss-ups, simply shifting

from an open-seat election to one with an incumbent changes our expectations from a dead heat to near certainty about the winner.”

Republicans wisely emphasized districts where candidate Mitt Romney had run well in 2002. The study indicates that a popular figure at the top of the party may assist down the ballot. Therefore, although Duquette (2003) has criticized the Massachusetts Republican Party as being nothing but a talent agency for recruiting gubernatorial candidates, it may well benefit the party to have a candidate who can win the governorship if that individual is committed to building the party at the legislative level. The percent Romney won in each district in 2002 was significant and was well correlated with unenrolled voters. This suggests that a strategy that focuses upon districts with a high number of unenrolled voters offers some opportunity. However, Republican prospects are stronger if aided by the allure of a popular governor, even if that leader is not on the ballot him or her self.

It is, also, true that a strategy that produces enhanced vote returns but few wins suggests that other factors must be addressed. In his study of the 2004 Republican challenge Jacobson (2007) focused upon factors such as professionalism, incumbency, redistricting, term limits, local party strength, and even the stigma of running as a Republican in Massachusetts. Foley (2005) considered policy issues raised in 2004, the district approval ratings of incumbents, Romney’s statewide approval ratings, and the resources the state party put into the election. At the very least, these studies assert the elusive prospect for Republican success in Massachusetts at the legislative level.

Conclusion

The research reported in this article attempts to examine key variables that have been the topic of academic studies and that the challenging Republican Party interpreted as hopeful factors in one of the “bluest” of the “blue states.” The effort borne by the GOP and headed by Governor Romney to recruit candidates, in 2004, was fruitful in the number of candidates who ran, but not in

producing competitive challengers. Because Romney quickly shifted his attention to running for president and served only one term a sustained effort by the party was not forthcoming and the ranks of Republican challengers plummeted in 2006.

I would have expected experience and open seats to have been significant. The fact that neither factor was should not suggest that Republicans in Massachusetts should ignore those factors. Studies in multiple states and over a number of elections have shown the potency of experience and opportunity. Massachusetts is a trial for Republicans. If the democratic promise of electoral competitiveness is to be fulfilled, the Massachusetts Republican Party must have sustained leadership at the top and candidates with enough money to run competitively, down below.

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