

Commonwealth Forum Transcript

A Republican Rebirth? The Future of the GOP in Massachusetts

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SUMMARY The following is a summary of the main points of the forum. It is not an exact transcript and should not be relied upon. This summary was prepared by State House News Service and is re-printed here with their kind permission.

Despite controlling the governor's office for the past 10 years, the Massachusetts Republican Party has seen its gains of the early 1990s fall by the wayside as Democrats have reclaimed the state treasurer's office, taken back the two Congressional seats the GOP had won, and watched their ranks slide in the Legislature by failing to field candidates in many races.

Who's to blame? How did the party that once dominated Massachusetts fall so far so fast, and how can it return to its previous strength? Those were the topics of discussion Tuesday morning at a forum sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth and the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. As it has for previous MassINC forums, the State House News Service has compiled an edited summary of the event.

Panelists were associate political science professor **Jeffrey Sedgwick** of UMass-Amherst, former Massachusetts GOP party chairwoman **Jean Inman**, former Oklahoma GOP Congressman **Mickey Edwards** of Harvard University, Boston Globe columnist **Jeff Jacoby** and state GOP executive director **John Brockelman**. MassINC Executive Director **Tripp Jones** moderated.

MassINC Deputy Director **Matt Malone** introduced the forum. He said our topic this morning is the future of the Republican Party in Massachusetts. A hundred years ago, this forum would have seemed unnecessary. The Republican Party overwhelmingly controlled the state then. This shift in the locus of power was the result of a shift in the demographics of the Commonwealth. These forums are non-partisan but the sponsors believe that healthy public life is a result of having at least two vibrant parties. Surely we can all agree that healthy debate represents the best of our democratic ideals.

MassINC co-chairwoman Gloria Larson: It is great to see more Republicans here than at any other forum. We're hoping for a lively set of diverse views, then to get good audience questions. We're going into our fifth year, and I'm proud that we've made such a difference. We focus on a broad series of initiatives and civic engagement. That's what these forums are all about. We are trying to create access to the broad middle class.

Having this debate and forum is the best way to spread the word and prepare for the future. I never say anything provocative, but the potential demise of the Republican Party in Massachusetts is wildly overstated. Our ability to hold the governors' seat through three terms, our ability to pull good people in from across the state and across

the country - that all speaks volumes about the party being alive and well. That's due largely to the hard work of some of the people up here today.

I also wanted to mention something that I think will raise our boats – the fact that we've elected Gov. George Bush. He's already pulled the Republican Party closer to the center and has a strong record of crossing the aisle to reach compromise on issues. The second thing is the growing independence of the electorate, many of whom used to identify as Democrats. They are crossing the aisle when they see the potential for leadership. That's going to hold us in good stead.

Finally, despite what you might read in the press, we have strong Republican leaders like Paul Cellucci and Jane Swift, who has gotten a tough rap, Mitt Romney who may return after the Olympics, Brian Cresta. Those are the folks I see on the horizon. Those people who say the party is not strong need only to look at how the governor was able to bring home Question 4. It looks like we've got a long road ahead, of course there's a lot to work to do, but we have a good set of panelists to help us sort this out. Put on your boxing gloves and have at it.

JONES: Thanks Gloria for that introduction and all your work. I am excited to moderate this. I want to thank the **Parker House** for hosting this. They are terrifically kind. I also want to thank the **Foundation for the Humanities**. I'd also like to thank my staff. They are a tremendous crew. We've lost a good friend this past week, **Arthur Lambert**. I'd like to take a moment to pause to think about him and his family who are going through that awful funeral. I know that as a partisan Democrat, he would have appreciated this event. I'm a Democrat, but let me tell you why this is so important. As a Democrat, the party pays a huge price in getting sloppy and lazy when there's no opposition. I've seen that up front. So professor, why don't you get us started with some background.

SEDGWICK: I'm giddy to be here – out in Amherst, you don't see this many Republicans in a lifetime. I had to round up the only other Republican there – my son – to drive me here. You know, time is a theoretical construct for academics. Let me take you back for a long overview on the party. The Republican Party rose in 1854 on the remains of the Whig Party, and dominated the state. For roughly 50 years, the Democrats (only) had the governorship for 11 years. The Republicans dominated the General Court. Republicans dominated the state from 1858 to 1958, when for the first time the Democrats took both chambers.

To give you a sense of the change, consider that in 1926 the Republican Party had a 177-63 majority in the House. Fifty years later the Democrats held the House 194-44, with three Independents. In 1952 the two parties were balanced. After then the Republican Party fell by 37 percent. Running as a Republican partisan became suicidal. In 1976, the party failed to contest more than half of the seats for the Legislature. We all know after 1976 there have been blips and troughs. But remember that Ronald Reagan carried Massachusetts twice, showing an insight into the potential for the party here. Consider these three dates: 1911, the passage of the direct primary law; 1918, passage of the initiative referendum to the Constitution; and 1928, the candidacy of Al Smith, their first nominated Catholic. We may want to come back to those dates.

JONES: Jeff Jacoby why don't you give us your perspective? You've been tough on the party. You've had time to look back, reconsider or extend your remarks.

JACOBY: Listening to the presentation only reinforces how desperate a situation we are in. In 1990, the Republican Party captured half of the statewide offices, 16 of the 40 seats in the Senate went Republican and there were enough Republicans in the House to force roll call votes. There was a feeling that this was a party on the move. That was reinforced two years later.

But I would argue that since then the story has been almost completely depressing and I lay the blame at the feet of Bill Weld and Paul Cellucci. They regarded building the party as not on the priority list. I understand that Bill Weld regarded the party infrastructure as not worth his time because it was not something he would ever benefit from. The deliberate decision was made by him that the party would be allowed to fall into disrepair. Fundraising was primarily for the Weld-Cellucci coffers. And most ominously, once Weld became governor, the Republican Party stopped drawing sharp distinctions between the parties. Weld made a point of reaching over party heads to make common cause with Democrats. It seems to me that beyond the mechanics of the party, nothing is more important to failure than failing to make differences. We need to make Democrats be defeated in the public policy arena. The Republicans under Bill Weld stopped making that a priority, and signaled that the party is on the way down. I find myself much more pessimistic than Gloria. I foresee the complete wipeout of the party in 2002.

JONES: Let's turn to our smiling friend John Brockelman. He's a new father.

BROCKELMAN: Forgive me if I accidentally try to burp Tripp. In a letter to the editor responding to Jeff, I've detailed exactly what Paul Cellucci has done over the last two years. I disagree with Jeff on whether we've been taking on tough issues. In the early 90s, it was fiscal discipline. Tax cuts have always been a top issue, and the climate has dramatically changed. Now we talk about what taxes to cut, not raise. What about welfare reform? What about education reform and Question 4? Am I happy about candidate recruitment? No. But we don't have a monopoly of Democrats – Republicans control the governorship and the SJC.

We can't have this discussion without recognizing that Massachusetts is a liberal Democratic state. We have been and will be for a long time. We have the largest percentage of voters in the country who consider themselves to be liberal. Take a look at every presidential election since 1970 – we've been at the bottom. Ron Reagan won here, but it was his fifth-worst state. Massachusetts is a liberal Democratic state, and when we make gains, that's important. Controlling the executive branch for 12 years is a phenomenal accomplishment given where we are. We have the lowest Republican registration in the country. Remember that Democrats are dealing with the same thing in the Dakotas, in Idaho. 1990 was a significant year, and the large gains we made in the Legislature were due to the voters being upset with how the state was being run. I ran a state Senate race in 1992, and Weld and Cellucci campaigned on that race. They put their shoulders behind me then and I'll continue to support them.

JONES: Mickey, this reminds me of what you said in *CommonWealth*. You said we don't have a problem with voters – you used a series of issues and situations to lay the groundwork for a transition. Mickey was a congressman from Oklahoma and saw the Republican Party there dramatically transform itself. Why don't you dive in here?

EDWARDS: I disagree with everything I've heard so far. The party is in dismal condition. I moved here eight years ago. What I've heard from the party is a lot of whining. The pile of excuses is just unbelievable. I'm not impressed by that. When I was elected to Congress, my district was 75 percent Democrat. I was the first Republican elected there since 1928. Don't tell me you've got a problem. Big deal. You've got things to overcome. I agree with Jeff Jacoby in that it is important to make policy differences, but they can't be made statewide.

There was a litmus test for candidates, whether they supported Gov. Cellucci's tax cut. You don't decide issues downtown. You decide them in the local district. But party offices here are in a downtown location. You go to party headquarters and you pass 400 pictures of Paul Cellucci. Where are the sheriffs and the commissioners? The state party is so focused on the top of the ticket. That's not how to win races. You win them block-by-block. I think the problem here is a total failure to understand local one-house-at-a-time politics. That's all it is. It's not rocket science. You call this a liberal state: look at how it votes on referendums. This is a pretty conservative state. The problem is not a failure to draw big-issue distinctions or *The Globe*, but the failure to do retail politics.

JONES: I'll give Jean a chance to respond. Then we'll get a little informal with some questions.

INMAN: I picked that downtown office, so I take responsibility for it. We wanted to be near the State House. We looked at a lot of really pitiful places. I don't see this as a difficulty with issues. I believe that Americans believe in Republicans and conservative thinking. They believe in education standards and keeping their money. But we don't articulate well enough. People always say they can't tell between the parties. That's our fault. When you phrase the issues the right way, people support us.

I think another problem here is that we don't want to win enough. We have a very small number of activists. Many of them work very, very hard to work for any candidate. But we have many who don't do that – they'll only support a Weld person or a Brockelman person or an Inman person. Until we look at pushing forward all Republican candidates, we won't go anywhere. When Democrats go to the polls, they look for all the D's. I've heard stories of Republicans not voting for each other because of something that happened 20 years ago. There are thousands of people who are out there who support Republican candidates. What we need to do is pull in new people, get them involved and fighting for Republican candidates. Democrats use legislative seats as training grounds – they bring in staff and aides who then go out and run. We can do that, but we can't if a sizable group of our supporters will not support all candidates.

JONES: The issue of recruiting has been brought up again and again. We've seen the increase in unenrolled voters. What's the story?

BROCKELMAN: It's a frustrating process. It's not easy. It's meeting with people one-on-one. We tried to shake loose candidates. We actually had people come to meet with the House and Senate minority leaders, with Gov. Cellucci and Lt. Gov. Jane Swift. I think we're victims of our own success from the economy perspective. People told us they don't want to leave their jobs and take a pay cut to run. I agree with Mickey in that this has to be precinct-by-precinct. We didn't have a litmus test for the tax cut. But we did try to tee up an issue that we put money behind, that people could run on. What we need to

do is focus on places we can win in, like Plymouth. It's a big mistake to think the state party can do this all. We have six employees. The legislative action committees need to do more. Just take a look at Maine. Their PACs for the Legislature raise far more than us. I went to Florida. They have county headquarters. They sent out absentee ballots. We need people to take an initiative.

SEDGWICK: I gave you the glories past of the party and the dismal present. We may not be focusing on the right things as Republicans. There is a fundamental fact about this state – it has never supported two-party competition. It's always been a one-party state. I don't want to learn how to field more candidates. I want to build the party so it takes over again. If we're going to do that, we have to ask where we learn those lessons. We should be looking at what the Democrats did to kick us out.

If you're a Republican, the most devastating thing to hear is that tax cuts are a Republican issue. That was a tax cut initiative, not a party initiative. It's hard to get a party organized when people are using the initiative process. Once the voters have that opportunity to roll back taxes, repeal state laws or pass new ones, why do they need Republicans? I can say this now that Barbara Anderson has left and I won't get anything thrown at me. I think there's an opportunity to get Democrats, Republicans and good government types to say that the initiative process has lived out its useful life.

JONES: Beside the tax cuts, which initiatives have undercut the party?

SEDGWICK: It's not the specifics. It's that if voters know that if they are dissatisfied, they can pass an initiative, they don't need a Republican Party. They don't need us.

JACOBY: You're arguing that initiatives are steam vents. But what undercuts that is that the initiative process exists in Republican-controlled states. I want to say something about the party's messages. John, I bet you were amazed when you went to Florida. In 1990, Bill Weld ran for governor and one of the motifs was that Bill Bulger would lose his influence. Weld pointed to Bulger as a central reason for corruption on Beacon Hill. What happened after Weld got into office? There was a 180-degree shift. There were weekly meetings. In 1994, Weld told people to vote for Bulger when there was a Republican running against him. Weld probably thought that was puckish, but what is the message sent to voters? It hasn't been that bad under Cellucci. But what's this about having Bob Durand, a Democratic Whip in the Senate, be the Secretary of Environmental Affairs. I'm sure he's a good guy, but what does that say to people? That doesn't tell Republicans that if they help they party, they get help. The power of patronage is something that does exist, and unless Republicans at the bottom get those rewards, why should they join?

BROCKELMAN: Bob Durand has maybe 2 percent name recognition. That isn't the problem.

JONES: Mickey, how did the transition occur in Oklahoma?

EDWARDS: I think the case is made when Republicans here are shocked to find that there are county party headquarters. I didn't think there were states that didn't have them. John, you said the party raised money for the governor's tax cut. That's not your job. You have to elect people. You can't be a wholly owned subsidiary of whoever is the governor at the moment. In Oklahoma we changed it with fundraisers in the districts, by

having coffees. We did it when there had never been a Republican governor. We started winning one precinct at a time.

This party focuses on the governor's agenda – and I like Paul Cellucci – but the party has a different job. We don't want to raise money from fat cats but from small dinners and coffees. Bring it down, down, down to a local level. Politics is very simple but hard. We did not do it from the top down. It took a few years. I'm not saying you'll be in control in 2002. You have to rebuild the party the way we lost it.

BROCKELMAN: It's comical that this panel thinks that having 10 years of Republican governors has been bad for the party. We've tried the route of the conservative firebrand of running campaigns. Look at how Weld and Cellucci won – fiscally conservative and socially liberal.

JACOBY: It's when would-be candidates are discouraged by people like Bob Durand....

BROCKELMAN: If Bush picks a Democrat for his cabinet, will that hurt his party?

JACOBY: The national party is not in danger. Locally, the message has been that if you get involved you won't get rewards. Jean said there's a lot of factionalism. There's always this metaphor of shootout in a lifeboat. One of the things I hear about is the sheer vindictiveness brought against people who aren't on the governor's side. I was told in 1998, the Republican officials in the city that they were told not to run people in South Boston. They were told that Cellucci was doing well, and that they didn't want to bring out people to vote against him.

BROCKELMAN: Is this an Oliver Stone movie? That's absurd.

JACOBY: I can't tell you how many times how I've heard of legislative Republicans discouraging candidates from running against their Democratic colleagues.

JONES: Jean, I'll let you respond, then we'll open this up.

INMAN: State committees do an awful lot of work in trying to find candidates. We even brought in a professional person who looked at the districts and spent months trying to find candidates. If anyone thinks that's easy, I'd love to have you come with us. It's a real chore. The biggest thing was people saying, I'm a Republican, how can I win? I was discouraged day after day after day. People don't want to throw their life on the line. It's grueling effort.

Even though this is discouraging, I don't want anyone to think that the effort was not made. I suggest a structural change. There needs to be a long-term plan. I would like to have the party chairman have a four-year term. Right now it's two years, then you're up for another two years. It took me at least nine months to get my feet on the ground. I didn't know the major donors. It took a year to get going and get a plan. A year later, we were gone. I think the chairman and executive director should have four years. If they're bad, fire them.

AUDIENCE STATEMENT (Chip Faulkner): I think the reason for the problems is the Republicans in the Legislature. They voted overwhelmingly for the teacher retirement.

Why did they do that? They'll never get the unions' support. They voted for Finneran for speaker. They got nothing from it. Last point: I got a call three weeks before the election from a candidate in Granby. He was furious that the Republican senator out there had attended his opponents' fundraiser.

JONES: I think that issue was raised in the magazine. What's the balance between finding consensus and being a good party leader?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The history of the party is instructive. There's light at the end of the tunnel because the old lines of religion and income have broken down. I agree with Jean that people tend to be conservative. Could someone comment on that, and also on the role of religion?

SEDGWICK: Watching the Democratic Party after 1928 would be a good lesson. One of the strategies used by the party was to build candidates from the local level. They contested every primary so that each candidate would get supporters. Fundraising was local, voter registration was local. It does need to be supported from the top. People need to be told they'll get killed but it's for the good of the party.

AUDIENCE QUESTION (Todd Sharek): Talk about lonely. I was amazed to get mailings for Bush from the governor. I was a McCain supporter and I didn't feel it was the business of the state committee to do anything for the president. What is the mission of the state committee?

BROCKELMAN: When I came in, we wanted to recruit more legislative candidates and increase the presence of the party in the media. We also wanted to get the tax cut on the ballot to give candidates an issue to run on. I was disappointed with candidate recruitment. My quick four-point plan is: We spread our resources too thin. We need to focus on two Senate races and four House races. We wouldn't fund any legislative incumbents. We should have the legislative PACs supporting those incumbents. We need people to take the initiative. We have six people on the state committee. In 1998, the Cellucci campaign, we had 30 staffers. If you want the party to run things, you need to raise \$3 million a year. The party can be the icing on the cake, not the cake. Reed Hillman won his race because he went through two pairs of shoes. That's how you win here.

JACOBY: Todd, you are right to be offended about the governor's support for Bush. The voters told us what they thought of Bush during the primary. Where the work should be done is getting people elected here. I was thrilled that Question 4 was a priority for the governor, but what I didn't understand why he wasn't all over the state urging people to vote against incumbents opposing that tax cut. He should have leveraged that. We ended up with a tax cut...

BROCKELMAN: The governor and lieutenant governor went to 70 events in support of local candidates, where the local media covered it. I'll send you the clips.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What evidence do you see that voters want Republicans in the Legislature?

JACOBY: As long as Republicans are not sending a strong message that's different from the Democrats, there isn't a reason.

BROCKELMAN: The message has been tax cuts, welfare reform and education reform. That's been a successful message. But it's not going door-to-door and saying here is my conservative agenda. It's about caring about the local sewer project or the potholes.

JACOBY: But part of it is that putting more Republicans in the Legislature will make a difference. When Weld was elected, the budget was half what it is. John, you keep talking about fiscal discipline. By my lights, when the level of state spending doubles, that's not fiscal discipline. When the governor's response to questions about the tax cut is to raise spending to prove we can afford the tax cut, that's not right. That's part of the reason why voters haven't been sending more Republicans.

AUDIENCE STATEMENT: (Kerry Healy, GOP candidate in the 6th Essex district): I was recruited by Jean and Jeff and John. My opponent is a popular man. What I'm seeing is that you do need candidates to throw themselves at these races, perhaps quixotically. People need to see that you are willing to put yourself out there. Those grassroots aren't going to be renewed unless people are getting into these races. Right now, we do look too much to the state committee. They are only six people can only do so much. The committee cannot be our savior. There are a number of young Republicans out there.

EDWARDS: If you are looking for a plan, follow Ray Bliss in Ohio. He was the chairman there for 20 years.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: (Wayne Woodlief): What's been done to nurture those McCain voters?

INMAN: A lot. There are a lot of people out there who will get involved when there's a good reason. Many who wanted to participate further asked us where they could go. We sent them to local candidate campaigns. They got into state rep races. Two of our chief volunteers are now in the State House, one for Rep. Jones and one for Sen. Lees. The young man who went to Jones' offices lived off his savings for a month in Quincy. His sole job was to make sure people had something to do. We found places for people to go. We hope even more of these people will jump in. We have them all in a database. One of the best things is the number of brand-new people who had never participated before. They asked, what can I do? There are thousands of those people out there, and they are the future of the party.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How can John and Jean do their job when there are under siege from the media? We had Robinson's problems, Swift's problems, Blute's problems. I'd ask them how much of their time is spent reacting to the malaise put by the media on the party.

EDWARDS: Paul Cellucci has a press secretary. Jane Swift has a press secretary. That's their job, to respond. John's job is to get people elected. If he's responding to the media, he's not doing his job.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What kind of volume of calls are they getting? I think they get four or five calls a day.

EDWARDS: Great. That leaves what, six hours for other work?

BROCKELMAN: Your job is to back up your guy. It is very important in having that other perspective in the press. You know that the reporters will always find Michael Goldman or some professor to say this is the end of the Republican Party.

AUDIENCE STATEMENT: (Kathy Casavant): We're extremely concerned about voter apathy. We're concerned about the number of centrist Democrats in the Legislature. We need a Republican Party to push the Democrats to where we want them to be. I'm encouraged by what I'm hearing today.

BROCKELMAN: If Kathy wants to make a donation, let me know.

AUDIENCE STATEMENT: (Peter Forman): I've been running for various offices for 20 years. There is a fundamental cultural difference between Republicans and Democrats. Democrats run for having the sheer power of government while Republicans focus in the agenda and run on issues. Republicans have been incredibly successful in this state. We turned the philosophy of this state government around. We had a profound impact on the Legislature. We changed the actions of the Legislature. You see it in the budget. Whether we can sustain it remains to be seen.

The real problem we have is that while we are correct on the philosophy and have changed it, we tend to focus on the philosophy and not on the mechanics of having power. We cannot govern successfully until we learn to run like Democrats. It is those local legislators that are out there pressing the personal touch, making those connections with voters. If that continues, we'll see an improvement. It's building that machinery, not just the philosophy that will bring that along.

JONES: I apologize for not recognizing the State House News Service earlier. They are transcribing this and it will be up on the Web within 24 hours. I also left out our director of planning. I may be a Democrat, but I appreciate being able to wear my elephant tie. I want to thank all our panelists and our audience. I also want to thank the Republicans for giving us a chance to see that we are non-partisan. I am forever grateful for that.

DISCLAIMER: The News Service coverage of this forum is an accurate summary of remarks, not a verbatim transcript.