

PART TWELVE

TEA PARTY CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN PRIMARY BENEFICIARIES OF AMERICA'S RIGHTWARD THRUST



Scott Walker is one of numerous far-right candidates who have assumed public office in recent years. This era is characterized by unverifiable touchscreens, polling discrepancies, memory card problems, reports of machines flipping votes on screen, and disparities between hand and electronic counts. The same funders who back the Tea Party also advocate for disenfranchisement of voters through onerous voter ID laws. It's worth investigating how coincidental these trends are. PHOTO: WisPolitics.com (CC).

By 2010, the electoral map was once again littered with upset victories that tipped the balance of power in America back toward the right. In Massachusetts, it was Tea Party candidate Scott Brown who achieved what the *New York Times* called an “extraordinary upset” in his race for the late Ted Kennedy’s seat—and thereby erased the Democrats’ filibuster-proof supermajority in the Senate. A little more than an hour after the polls closed on January 19, the Associated Press declared that Brown had defeated Attorney General Martha Coakley, becoming the state’s first Republican senator in thirty years.

By most accounts, Coakley, who was initially favored to win, ran a lackluster campaign. And her opponent was riding a wave of populist discontent with the Obama Administration. Yet even Brown's victory, widely predicted by January 19, raised some questions about voting technology. According to the Election Defense Alliance, in all seventy-one locations where ballots were counted by hand under public observation—more than 65,000 ballots in all—Coakley beat her opponent by 2.8 percent. Their analysis also showed that computer-counted communities were more Democratic by registration and historically less likely to support Republican candidates.

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Where Massachusetts ballots were counted publicly by hand, Martha Coakley beat her Tea Party opponent, but in electronically counted areas, she lost.

In Florida, Rick Scott was elected governor in November after an historically close race with his opponent, Alex Sink. Scott, a millionaire and Tea Party favorite, squeaked through with a 1.15 percent margin of victory, representing just 61,550 votes, after a number of Dominion machines in Hillsborough County failed to upload results. In the wake of what was described as a memory-card glitch, election workers manually rescanned about 38,000 early-voting ballots, without any supervision by the public or the press. Sink, who needed only 35,000 more votes to trigger a mandatory recount, conceded the following day.

Further darkening Florida's electoral atmosphere was Scott's record of legal travails. He had narrowly avoided indictment in the late 1990s for his role as CEO of Columbia/HCA, a private health-care company. HCA eventually admitted to substantial criminal conduct and paid a record \$1.7 billion to the federal government. Whistleblower lawsuits alleged that HCA engaged in a series of schemes to defraud Medicare, Medicaid, and TRICARE, the military's health-insurance program.

Scott left the company unscathed, with a reported \$300 million parachute, then spent \$73 million of his own money running for office. Two years later, he targeted 180,000 registered voters in an attempt to purge noncitizens from Florida's voter rolls. Many of the state's sixty-seven county election supervisors refused to carry out the purge. Leon County supervisor Ion Sancho called it un-American behavior. "This is an example of partisan manipulation of the process to try to affect the outcome," he told me. "It's sad but true."

In Wisconsin in 2010, the new Tea Party governor-elect, Scott Walker, unveiled a violently corporatist agenda destined for legal challenge—ensuring that the 2011 race for a seat on the Wisconsin Supreme Court would be of crucial importance. The election was ultimately decided by Waukesha county clerk Kathy Nickolaus, who "discovered" 14,300 votes on her computer late on Election Night. This windfall handed the victory to the conservative incumbent, Justice David Prosser, for whom Nickolaus had worked for seven years. Prosser later joined the court's majority in upholding Walker's union-busting legislation, stripping workers of their collective-bargaining rights in the birthplace of the Progressive movement.



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There is, finally, South Carolina’s 2010 race for U.S. Senate, which Republican Jim DeMint won with 78 percent of the vote. What is mysterious is not the ultimate outcome, but the Democratic primary that preceded it, which tossed up a fairly fortuitous opponent for DeMint: Alvin Greene, an unemployed thirty-two-year-old accused sex offender living in his father’s basement.

Greene, often described as “incoherent,” ran no campaign: no website, no appearances at Democratic events, not even a yard sign. Yet he miraculously beat his opponent in the Democratic primary, former judge and four-term state legislator Vic Rawl, by an 18 percent margin. Voters and campaign workers reported that the ES&S touchscreen machines “flipped” votes to Greene all day long. Meanwhile, the absentee ballots—which were counted by hand—told a different story. In half of the state’s forty-six counties, there was a 10 percent disparity between absentee ballots and those counted by machine; in Lancaster County, Rawl won 84 percent of the absentee vote.

Greene denied accusations (or, some would say, observations) that he was a GOP plant, while declining to explain where he got the \$10,400 needed to file as a candidate. Rawl lodged a formal protest and requested a new primary. That was quickly knocked down by the executive committee of the South Carolina Democratic Party—and DeMint sailed to a rout in November.