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Gene Healy: Mass. election refutes weak tea conservatism

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
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If Republican Scott Brown wins the Massachusetts special election Tuesday, the Bay State will have its first GOP senator since the era when disco was king. And Brown will have the much-derided Tea Party legions to thank. They've turned out in force, hoping he'll provide the vote needed to strangle Obamacare.

That ought to give pause to the "reformist" conservatives insisting that Reagan-Goldwater conservatism is dead. Yet the reformists' unofficial leader, former Bush speechwriter David Frum, puts a different spin on what Massachusetts portends.

Brown is no "talk-radio conservative," Frum maintains: As a state senator, he "voted in favor of Mitt Romney's health plan" and supported greenhouse gas curbs. It would be "a travesty" if his victory empowered "anger, paranoia and extremism," which is how Frum characterizes rank-and-file "rejectionism."

But it isn't a desire for Romneyish RINOism that has Tea Partiers sleeping on couches and getting the vote out for Brown. They're Exhibit A in what Frum recently termed the "furious rejectionist frenzy" motivating the GOP base.

"It's the rank and file who are the problem here!" Frum exclaimed: It has hamstrung GOP leaders by preventing them from cutting deals with President Obama.

Right now, though, "rejectionist frenzy" looks like smart politics and smart policy. Even if Brown loses, the fact that he came so close deep in Blue State territory will have some Democrats looking for an excuse to switch their vote on a health care bill that passed by the slimmest of margins in the House.

Whatever Tuesday's result, this much is clear: The small-government movement has little to learn from Weak Tea Conservatives like Frum, whose desperate search for relevance blinds them to the facts on the ground.

Frum makes No. 33 in the U.K. Telegraph's latest list of America's "most influential" conservatives, because he's "at the forefront of the debate over what conservatism should be and how the Republican party can recover." But Frum's contribution to that debate has been marked by hilariously inept advice.

Frum's 2007 book "Comeback" is subtitled "Conservatism That Can Win Again." It can win, he says, by getting serious about global warming and mounting a federal campaign against obesity. In a new, post-Obama afterword, Frum suggests that McCain should have picked Susan Collins as his running mate to appeal to independents.

In "Comeback," Frum praises Romneycare, the model for Obama's health reform, reprimanding my colleague Mike Tanner for opposing an individual mandate to purchase health insurance. The mandate is "unquestionably constitutional," Frum wrote last month, and Republicans are silly to question it.

Frum insists that conservatives need to learn from their recent electoral drubbings; but it seems he hasn't learned a thing from the Iraq war, a key contributor to GOP losses in 2006 and 2008. "America still needs the neocons," he proclaims in a Dec. 8 Newsweek piece. Why? Because, among other things, they're "practical."

This, from a man who co-authored a book proclaiming it's "victory or Holocaust" in the war on terror, and that new Iraqs may be necessary in North Korea, Iran and Syria. The title? "An End to Evil." There's a "practical" goal.

Frum's message to the GOP is: Give up on small government and gird for endless war. Neocons once boasted that they were "liberals mugged by reality," but somewhere along the line they learned how to fight back.

Frum isn't wrong about everything. It's probably true, as he says, that Sarah Palin's "willful divisiveness" alienated independents by setting up a split between "real Americans and not so real Americans." But it's a little ripe to hear that from a man who famously labeled the great Robert Novak an "unpatriotic conservative" for opposing the Iraq war.

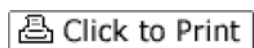
And when Frum's wrong, he's really wrong. "Reagan Republicanism offers solutions to the problems of 40 years before, not to those of the 21st century," he writes in "Comeback."

Funny enough, though, the problems of 2010 -- rooted in an overweening government that recognizes no limits on its capabilities -- look a lot like the problems of the late '70s. Self-styled "reformist" conservatives may not recognize that, but the voters are starting to.

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