

## OPINION

## The Axelrod Method

By Matthew Kaminski

**A** couple Januaries ago, the first African-American governor of Massachusetts took the oath of office on the State House steps. "Change is not always comfortable or convenient or welcome," he declared. "But it is what we hoped for, what we have worked for, what you voted for, and what you shall have."

The swearing-in ended an improbable journey for Deval Patrick—and started a painful lesson in political realities for a rookie executive.

His story provides a useful prism to view the current presidential race. The Patrick campaign is the model for Barack Obama's effort, down to the messages of "hope" and "change" and the unofficial Patrick slogan of "Yes, We Can!" The men are friends

The 'change' president could be in for a rough ride on Capitol Hill.

with similar backgrounds (raised by single mothers, educated at Harvard Law) and electoral appeal (unconventional, "historic" candidacies built around an inspiring personal story). More importantly perhaps, they share an image-maker and political guru in David Axelrod, the strategist who told the New York Times Magazine last year that Obama presidential campaign themes were field tested in Massachusetts.

As a path to power, the Axelrod method appears to be the best thing going today. Coming into the 2006 race, Mr. Patrick was a political novice with 1%-2% name recognition in a state that's 6% black. He faced off against a sitting state attorney general favored by the Democratic Party establishment. The former Clinton administration lawyer energized the grass-roots and youth vote with superior organization and stirring oratory. The candidate himself was the message; the campaign dwelled on his personal story, not the issues. As one Patrick advertisement trilled, "His life has been the triumph of hope, hard work and determination."

Doug Rubin, the governor's chief

of staff today and then a Patrick campaign strategist, says Mr. Axelrod's AKP&D Message and Media political consulting firm—which also brought into the Patrick team the current Obama campaign manager David Plouffe—got the nod because "the governor wanted to make the case for himself . . . in a different from traditional campaign." Massachusetts never saw anything like it. Mr. Patrick upset the favorite in the Democratic primary and won the general election by 21 points.

But the Axelrod method has its drawbacks once the candidate takes office. Upon winning his party nomination, Mr. Patrick declared, "I come here to change politics as usual. What's missing from politics as usual is"—guess what?—"hope."

That crusading optimism, so critical to his election victory, fast bumped up against established Democratic interests such as the police unions and powerbrokers on Beacon Hill. They didn't know Mr. Patrick, didn't appreciate him jumping the queue to the governor's chair, didn't buy his reformist outsider message, and frankly liked things as they were. Great speeches or popular support were insufficient for Mr. Patrick to get his way.

Some problems came self-inflicted. He made no serious effort at first to penetrate the insular and territorial culture of the State House. Former Lt. Gov. Tom O'Neill, who is Tip O'Neill's son, says that Mr. Patrick "underestimated" the challenge of governing on Beacon Hill. "That comes with not being of it."

Even before his inauguration, the governor-elect explicitly excluded from his transition team any members of the legislature, people by nature sensitive to slights from the corner office. His first chief of staff had no formal experience in state politics. In the early days, Gov. Patrick renovated his office and upgraded his car with state money and was subsequently forced to pay for it out of his pocket. Noticing these stumbles, the Patrick-friendly local media turned on the governor. "They built him up, they built him up, then they took him down," says State Senate President Therese Murray.

Gov. Patrick's bigger challenge was to turn an autobiographical, pseudo-post-ideological campaign into a man-



Barack Obama and Deval Patrick

date for governing. The transition proved hard and, today, remains incomplete. Having made himself the focus of the election, Mr. Patrick could not easily point to a particular policy agenda of his own. "He won a mandate for a governing style," says Byron Rushing, a House Democrat. "That presents a problem because everyone in their mind has an agenda to go with that style." Jay Kaufman, another representative, adds, "Each decision disappointed someone."

At the same time, the committee chairs, and in particular House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, had their own ideas. They'd also won elections, after all. Many of them supported the insider candidate, Tom Reilly, in the primary. "I think Patrick thought that the election was the end of the tensions between him and Democrats who didn't support him," says Mr. Rushing. "Of course all was not forgiven."

By far, the governor's most difficult relationship was with Mr. Di-

was off in New York to sign a \$1.35 million book deal. "It was a definitional time," says Mr. Galvin.

Mr. Patrick's poll ratings sank fast, hitting a low with 41% approval of his job performance this April (56% disapproved). "The governor made everyone feel good, then they didn't feel good at all," says Khalil Byrd, his former deputy campaign manager.

After his new kind of politics got him into trouble, the governor changed tack. He hired Mr. Rubin, an old hand in Massachusetts politics, to run his staff. He reached out to Mr. DiMasi. Over dinner this summer, Mr. Patrick said, the men "had a great, quiet, come-to-Jesus kind of conversation." Mr. DiMasi declined to be interviewed, but told the Boston Globe in August that, "We got together and bared our souls. We agreed to apologize for some of the things both of us said, and we agreed to put the past behind us."

As part of this new understanding, Mr. Patrick scaled back his legislative ambitions, and backed more traditional Democratic priorities. He promised to change the culture in Boston and, some say, the culture changed him.

**P**lans to cut property taxes, a highlight of his campaign advertising, were shelved. He softened the commitment to teacher testing and expanded state-funded health-care coverage. He moved to fulfill a major campaign promise this month by mandating that flagmen, not policemen, direct traffic; the police unions will fight him on this decision, which deprives their members easy overtime pay. It took him nearly two years to act and it's far from certain he'll win.

The governor's approval rating is nudging back up to 45% in an October SurveyUSA poll, still nearly 20 points off its inauguration-day high. Mr. Patrick doesn't yet face a serious challenger for a possible second term, which he claims to want. He figures in cabinet and Supreme Court speculation in a possible Obama administration. If his friend's experience in Boston is any guide, the "change" president could be in for a rough ride with the Democratic warhorses on Capitol Hill.

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