

# Democratic leaders grapple with strategy to retain party's dominance

Top Democrats gather to ponder strategy against energized GOP and politics after Deval Patrick



**From left: Robert A. DeLeo, Stanley C. Rosenberg, Maura Healey, William F. Galvin, and Martin J. Walsh.**

**By Jim O'Sullivan and Frank Phillips | GLOBE STAFF MAY 14, 2015**

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Alarmed by a heavily financed GOP effort to challenge local Democrats, the state's top Democratic Party leaders gathered at a storied Boston hotel last week for a high-level strategy meeting that several longtime political figures called unprecedented in their

experience.

The event also furnished a venue for Mayor Martin J. Walsh, who helped organize the gathering, to assert himself as a statewide leader of the party as it looks to fill the political void created by the departure of former governor Deval Patrick.

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All four of the party's constitutional officers, both legislative branch leaders, three US representatives, and proxies for US Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward J. Markey gathered at a confab convened the Omni Parker House by Walsh and party chairman Thomas McGee, a state senator from Lynn.

The session's stated purpose was to plan the party's political strategy over the next few years, as Democrats look to preserve their legislative dominance in the face of a reawakened, well-financed Republican grass-roots movement and a popular Republican in the governor's office.

"It was unusual, but necessary," said Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who first arrived on Beacon Hill as a House member in the early 1970s. "I have no memory nor did I ever hear of such a meeting in the past."

Of the state's Democrats, Warren has become popular nationally by embracing populist causes, most recently leading the fight this week against a trade deal proposed by President Obama. And Attorney General Maura Healey has soared in popularity among party activists since her campaign last year. Even so, no Democrat has emerged on the state level to take over the dominant partisan leadership role that Patrick and his political operatives provided for eight years.

As chief executive of the state's largest city, and highly popular with the key Democratic constituency of organized labor, Walsh appears to be trying to step into the role of party organizer, a role that his predecessor, the late Thomas M. Menino, often shied from.

"There's no doubt that Marty's asserting himself on a statewide basis," said one attendee, speaking on condition of anonymity about the closed-door meeting. "This seems to

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*'Democrats need to build up the grass roots . . . and reinvigorate the city and town committees.'*

Deborah Goldberg, state treasurer

be in line with that. I don't know what his end game is. I sat there thinking, 'This was a meeting that Menino would never convene.'

To be sure, Democrats — including Galvin, Healey, Treasurer Deborah Goldberg, Auditor Suzanne Bump, Senate President Stanley C. Rosenberg, and House Speaker Robert DeLeo — hold nearly all the state's high-profile public positions and lopsided majorities in the House and Senate.

But Patrick's grass-roots-based political machine controlled the party apparatus for so many years that his departure has left something of a vacuum, particularly at a time when it has just lost the governor's office and is struggling to find new energy and focus. And no Democrat has emerged as a clear favorite to challenge Baker, who enjoys historic favorability ratings early in his term.

McGee played down the significance of the party gathering, saying he "didn't see it as out of the ordinary at all."

But others who attended said the discussion was a serious and intense review of the state of the Democratic Party, with a strong agreement that it needs to reinvigorate its activist base in the face of the GOP's building its infrastructure and campaign bank accounts.

"Republicans are taking their city and town committees seriously," said Goldberg in describing the tone of the session. "Democrats need to build up the grass roots, expand membership, and reinvigorate the city and town committees."

The meeting focused mostly on the legislative elections in 2016, when there will be no statewide races. The party can usually depend on high-level Democratic candidates — particularly for president, governor, or US Senate — to increase party turnout.

In recent years, Republican activists and wealthy donors, reaching beyond efforts by the state party itself, have created political groups and used local GOP town committees to raise large sums of money and marshal volunteers to spread out across the state to knock on doors and pour resources into legislative races.

For example, the Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, a recently formed independent group created by wealthy conservative businessman and dissident GOP state committee member Rick Green, spent \$304,000 last year targeting several incumbent Democrats

in the Legislature. Though there were only a few successes, the Alliance's tactics shook Democrats.

Now, with Baker riding high in the polls and demonstrating his fund-raising prowess, Democrats are worried the GOP will also draw on him to campaign heavily for Republican candidates.

Already, GOP groups are getting behind Michael T. Gaffney, a city councilor in Worcester who is challenging Mayor Joseph Petty's run for a third term this year.

Gaffney is considered a longshot in the nonpartisan race, but is stirring up anti-government, anti-tax sentiment, worrying some Democrats, including US Representative James P. McGovern, a Democrat from Worcester.

At the Parker House session, the congressman pointed to Gaffney's effort — highly unusual because Republicans often avoid running in the state's urban centers — as an example of the increasing strength of the GOP resurgence in Worcester County over the last several election cycles.

Two other representatives of the nine-member congressional delegation, Joseph P. Kennedy III and Seth Moulton, joined McGovern at the meeting.

Walsh and McGee, urgently trying to organize a Democratic response, initiated the meeting at the Parker House, a 150-year old Boston institution that has hosted political gatherings of 19th-century abolitionists, John F. Kennedy's political operations, and some of the liveliest press events in recent state history. After McGee placed an initial round of invitations, Walsh followed up with phone calls, attendees said.

"It was important to have it because it reflects a reality of the very partisan attacks on Democrats despite the bipartisan rhetoric of the Baker administration," Galvin said.

Walsh dismissed the suggestion that the session was designed to position himself as a statewide party leader. "I think it's important to have a conversation about where the party is going," he said.

Still, his role in helping set up the session made clear to some that Walsh was stepping out politically like no other mayor in recent decades. His chief fund-raiser, Laurie Bosio, attended the meeting, which came the week after the mayor delivered a keynote address at the state's annual Roosevelt Awards reception that stirred buzz among insiders.

If Walsh looks to test the electoral waters outside the capital, the historical precedent would not be encouraging. John Collins was soundly defeated in the 1966 Senate primary. Kevin White lost his 1970 bid for governor, and Raymond L. Flynn lost his 1998 congressional race.

Menino never ran for an office beyond City Hall.

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