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# The underdog

Sara Orozco thinks she can beat all-American GOP superstar Scott Brown. Can she convince anyone else?

By DAVID S. BERNSTEIN | August 13, 2008





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Sara Orozco and Scott Brown, total opposites, are perfect candidates for a State Senate district with political bipolar disorder. Challenger Orozco comes from the northern part of the Bristol, Norfolk, and Middlesex district, where liberal communities such as Wellesley and Needham elect lefty Democratic state reps like Alice Peisch and Lida Harkins. Incumbent Scott Brown comes from the south, where rock-solid conservative bastions like Wrentham and Attleboro send three of the state's few Republicans to the House of Representatives.

The two candidates are, like the two parts of their district, ideologically split on almost every issue. With such a clear-cut distinction, in one of the few competitive races in the state, you might imagine that Democrats and progressive groups would have Orozco near the top of their list of priority causes.

That's starting to happen, but slowly. They realize how high the stakes are — Democrats would dearly love to deal a deathblow to Brown's political career, which many see leading to a run for governor or US Senate. But so far, many remain unconvinced that Orozco, a lesbian Cuban-American psychologist who has never held public office, has any real chance of knocking off the state's current GOP poster boy.

She is up against an all-American incumbent straight out of central casting. Brown is tall and model-handsome (he in fact did model at one time), with the best head of hair in the State House. He is married to WCVB-TV reporter Gail Huff, with two daughters — one of whom starred on the Noble & Greenough basketball squad (and currently plays for Boston College) and was an *American Idol* finalist. Brown is involved in everything good and clean-cut, from the Wrentham Lions Club to the USA Triathlon Federation. He is a crusader against sex offenders, for which he has received recognition from the US Chamber of Commerce. For chrissakes, he was unavailable for

interviews this past week because he was serving his National Guard duty — how all-American can you get?

Orozco is not from central casting — she is more of an indie-film character. A first-generation American born and raised in Miami, daughter of a Kmart employee and a cement-factory worker, she worked her way from nothing to a Harvard Medical School academic appointment, and eventually her own psychology practice. She is a breast-cancer survivor. She is a single mother of twin nine-year-old boys from her 12-year relationship with another woman — which ended in divorce two years after they finally achieved the right to marry.

On paper, this doesn't look like a fair match. Brown does not appear to be sweating it — he has not yet set up a campaign office — and Republicans within the state organization are almost dismissive of Orozco.

To those who are convinced that Orozco can win, that's just fine: they want the incumbent to underestimate her.



But they do need to convince Democratic Party leaders, interest groups, and grassroots progressives that Orozco has a serious shot. "There will be a calculation about where to spend the effort," one progressive organizational leader says. For the moment, most of those groups are more focused on races with primary battles. After those come and go in mid September, Orozco needs to have some evidence that she's worth the investment.

#### Obama's Coattails?

The theory in her favor is simple: bland, vanilla Angus McQuilken twice came within a hairsbreadth of beating Brown, so a good candidate with a compelling story just needs to squeak out a few extra votes. Plus, the turnout for the presidential election should favor Democrats, who are more enthused about Obama than Republicans are about McCain.

"This election reminds me a lot of 1992," says McQuilken, referring to the year Cheryl Jacques — another perfect reflection of the district's northern personality — pulled an upset to win that seat over ultraconservative David Locke, a State Senate minority leader from the southern communities who had been in office 32 years. Bill Clinton topped the ballot that year. "It made a big difference in turnout," McQuilken says.

This overlooks the fact that both of McQuilken's losses to Brown occurred in equally advantageous circumstances: the same 2004 elections when Democratic voters came to vote for John Kerry, first in the presidential primary and then the general election.

Brown is easy to poke fun at — even some Republicans in the State House call him a lightweight, and worse — but tough to beat. He's been running, and winning, for 16 years, as assessor, selectman, state representative, and state senator. He has a terrific field organization; he is as good a fundraiser as the GOP has in the state these days; and he and his staff know the district by heart.

And while Orozco and other Democrats say he has been ineffective, it usually takes a stronger argument than that to oust an incumbent. As one Democratic observer puts it: "Scott hasn't done anything to piss off enough voters to lose."



I don't see him losing," says one Republican insider. "It's not going to happen."

Yet, an increasing number on the left believe it can. "That district is becoming ever-so-slightly more progressive over time," says MassAlliance executive director Georgia Hollister Isman. The district favored Deval Patrick in 2006, for instance, after voting strongly for Republican Mitt Romney in 2002.

Brown also lost a little of his luster this past year, in a roundly condemned performance at King Philip Regional High School in Wrentham.

Brown had been invited to address students about gay marriage, which he has steadfastly opposed. The senator used the opportunity to berate — by name — students who had written nasty things about him on Facebook. The performance included a recitation of profanity-laden entries.

More recently, a mini-controversy has emerged concerning Brown and the owner of the Plainridge horse-race course located in his district — whose interests Brown has aggressively advocated, particularly during debates this spring about expanded gambling in the state. Brown disclosed just a few weeks ago that his teenage daughter co-owns a race horse with the track's owner.

### Long odds

Orozco is clearly not one to be deterred by long odds: at five-foot-two she was Florida's high-school volleyball player of the year and earned a sports scholarship that made college possible.

More grimly, she went through multiple surgeries and radiation to survive breast cancer — and then helped her mother recover from the same disease just a year later.



That experience 10 years ago pushed Orozco into specializing in therapy for patients going through cancer and other serious medical challenges. The experiences of her patients, in turn, got her involved in the need to reform health-care delivery and coverage.

“Instead of fighting for their lives, they were fighting for their health insurance,” says Orozco.

Her campaign is shaping her message to make her palatable to the social conservatives in the district who might be ready to ditch Brown. She emphasizes that she is a doctor and small-business owner, who has two sons in the public-school system.

MassAlliance, a coalition of progressive organizations, is already helping with field operations, and others are pitching in as well. More will come, particularly when phone-banking begins in earnest this fall.

And, if they truly come to believe they can beat Brown, groups such as MassEquality, MassAlliance, and the Massachusetts Teachers Association can do their own mailings and literature, to make up for what those close to the campaign concede will be a fundraising gap.

The problem, some Democratic activists say, is that if it does start to look like Orozco has a chance, the state GOP will send in everything it's got. The party can't afford to lose Brown, who fundraises for other candidates and the party committee.



Then again, everything the state GOP has isn't very much these days, particularly compared with what the state Democrats and their allies have at their disposal.

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