Remember how in the 1990s, everyone was talking about globalization? Protesters railed against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, angry about treatment of Third World workers and homogenization of cultures. Thomas Friedman published The Lexus and the Olive Tree, his best-selling paean to globalization, which argued that wherever Big Macs are sold, there are no wars—meaning that if Americans export the best of what we do, while respecting cultural differences, we’ll raise the global standard of living.

No one is excited about globalization anymore. The tide started turning on 9/11, when our great national trauma prompted a turning inward. Global heroes were replaced by local heroes. Trends in everything from social networking to environmental awareness and foodie culture have exponentially increased our interest in all things local.

Now I have all the world’s newspapers just a fingertip’s length away, on my BlackBerry and laptop, but I read The Stamford (Conn.) Advocate on the train during my morning commute. I like the restaurant reviews, ads for sales at neighborhood stores and local political news. I can’t get all that from international newswires or even mega-newspapers such as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. No wonder one analyst told CNN that 800-plus community news sites had launched since 2004.

But Americans’ new local focus extends well beyond eating and shopping. Politics has become the local pop culture. People across the country know more than ever about their mayoral candidates. A Zogby poll last fall found that 52 percent of respondents pay the same amount of attention to local and national politics.

And then there’s Massachusetts. Scott Brown won a state-level race for a U.S. Senate seat, but no one would say his victory has strictly local implications. Just like that, Massachusetts voters upended national politics: Brown’s win ended the Democrats’ supermajority, put the brakes on health care and added question marks to everything from financial reform to cap and trade, all of which, of course, will have global effects. John McCain called Brown’s victory a “shot heard around the country if not around the world.” A national USA Today/Gallup poll said 72 percent of those surveyed believe the outcome “reflects frustrations shared by many Americans, and the president and members of Congress should pay attention to it,” while only 18 percent say it “reflects political conditions in Massachusetts and doesn’t have a larger meaning for national politics.”

You can’t use the words frustrations and Americans in the same sentence these days without thinking of the Tea Partiers. Their protests have taken activism to a new local level—the first one, on Tax Day 2009—but at the same time have ratcheted up global noise. As New York Times columnist David Brooks put it, “A year ago, the Obama supporters were the passionate ones. Now the tea party brigades have all the intensity.” And this movement, which defines itself not by what it’s for but by what it’s against (taxes, government, regulation,
deficits), has real influence, too: A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll found that 41 percent of Americans have a positive view of the Tea Party movement, a higher percentage than Democrats or Republicans got.

The Tea Partiers espouse another word of the year: populist. Merriam-Webster defines the word as “claiming to represent the common people.” I define it as local-looking. These people don’t care how the country is doing in think-tank reports or how economists evaluate it. Populist is localist.

When my local congressman, a Democrat, visited with constituents, I was stunned. Even if the freshman representative, who, not coincidentally, is up for re-election this year, had been flagged as a target for the Republicans’ planned reclamation of the House this fall, I wasn’t prepared for the viciousness of the attacks against him. He was clobbered by them, and, more striking, his opponents weren’t the Middle American caricatures but my friends and neighbors. Who knew we had Tea Partiers in Fairfield, Conn.?

Maybe it sounds self-serving to talk so much about the state where I live. But I’m convinced Connecticut is the new Illinois--and I argued on “CNN American Morning” in December 2008 that Chicago was the trends city to watch, for more reasons than it had nurtured Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey. What a difference a year makes. President Obama’s future might still be rewritten—in the battleground state of Connecticut. In January, four statewide polls showed 54 to 63 percent of residents approving of the job the president is doing (although Quinnipiac University notes the 55 percent it tallied is Obama’s lowest ever in Connecticut).

Democratic Sen. Chris Dodd announced his retirement after 30 years, the second nail in the coffin of the Ted Kennedy legacy (one I believe many of us underestimated for too long). Longtime Attorney General Richard Blumenthal has announced his intention to run for Dodd’s seat, putting the AG spot up for grabs. And Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell has also announced she’s retiring, creating a free-for-all among more than a dozen candidates on both sides, with no obvious enduring front-runner.

That’s three major races, all of which are being hailed as referendums on Obama and the state of the union. My fellow HuffPost blogger Suzanne Langlois explains them here. So after years of being a blue state with a red governor, Connecticut could see its political colors change. People far west of the Hudson River are watching. (And when Jesse Jackson visited a few weekends ago, he poked a hole, no pun intended, in Connecticut’s vulnerable point: We’re an economic doughnut, with some great wealth around and everyone else falling in.)

But all of that is just prelude for 2012, when the Senate term of Joe Lieberman, arguably the most polarizing (among other adjectives) figure in Congress, is up. It’s likely to be a slugfest and a big media draw, even without the most famous name in politics entering the fray: Political spectators are already slavering over the possibility that Ted Kennedy Jr. could run for Lieberman’s seat.

No matter the players, the race will bring the spotlight to Connecticut because it’s now a microcosm of the U.S. Once home to Republican moderate Lowell Weicker, a three-term senator whom Lieberman beat in 1988 for the seat, Connecticut today seems to be a place where moderation is missing. Could Weicker, who now lives in the political hot spot of central Virginia, ever have imagined the social events of non-doughnut dimensions, let alone Tea Parties, happening in the state he once governed?

I truly believe the nation’s mind and mood is now reflected in Connecticut politics. So as these local developments heat up, we’ll all be paying attention—and wondering what national and global ramifications they might have. Thank goodness for local newspapers.