

Former Klan leader Duke narrowly misses runoff in Louisiana congressional vote

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Former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke finished third in a special election held Saturday for a vacant congressional seat in Louisiana. Duke received 27,967 votes, 19 percent of the total, and fell only 4,000 votes short of winning a place in the runoff election set for May 29.

The top two candidates, former Louisiana Governor David Treen and State Representative David Vitter, will face off for the 1st District seat held by Congressman Robert Livingston. Treen received 36,542 vote, or 25 percent, and Vitter 31,652 votes, or 22 percent. The turnout was relatively high for a special election, 36 percent of registered voters.

Livingston stepped down last December, after 21 years in office, amid reports of marital infidelity. His personal life became the subject of intense media scrutiny when he was chosen by the House Republican caucus to replace Newt Gingrich as Speaker of the House.

The narrow defeat of Duke came after state and national Republican Party officials had downplayed his chances in the campaign and refused to denounce his candidacy, claiming the former Klansman had been reduced to a fringe figure with only 2 to 4 percent of the vote in pre-election polls.

Duke won a state legislative seat in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie, part of the 1st Congressional District, in 1989-90, and he chairs a Republican Party parish (county) committee in the district. In 1990 Duke won the Republican nomination for US Senate, but lost the general election to incumbent Democrat J. Bennett Johnston. In 1991 Duke finished second in the open primary vote for Louisiana governor, but lost the runoff to Democrat Edwin Edwards.

The May 2 result was Duke's best showing in any election since that 1991 gubernatorial campaign, and it

came despite the fact that he was heavily outspent by four of his rivals--Treen, Vitter, millionaire ophthalmologist Monica Monica (sic) and Robert Couhig, owner of a local minor league baseball team--all of them Republicans. The only Democrat in the contest, State Representative Bill Strain, finished fifth in a token effort.

Duke actually carried Tangipahoa Parish, a rural county which is one of four in the district, and finished second in another rural county, Washington Parish. Half the district's population is in the New Orleans suburbs, and the other half in the three counties which lie north of Lake Ponchartrain, along the border between Louisiana and Mississippi.

According to the *Almanac of American Politics*, the 1st Congressional District is "the most upscale, affluent, highly educated district in Louisiana." Nonetheless, nearly 20 percent of those voting cast their ballots for a candidate who recently published a book elaborating his longstanding view that blacks are genetically inferior and calling for an "Aryan Revolution" in America.

Duke's 736-page diatribe, *My Awakening*, was published in March, just in time for the congressional campaign. In it he drops the pretense, adopted during his statewide campaigns in 1990 and 1991, that he has abandoned neo-fascist and white supremacist views. The ex-KKK leader openly declares his support for an eventual "physical revolution" to defend the interests of "our people"--i.e., whites.

Significantly, despite the publication of Duke's *Mein Kampf*, both Republican Governor Mike Foster and state Republican Party chairman Mike Francis refused to repudiate Duke as a potential Republican congressman. Foster had previously declined to reject Duke's support when he won his first race for governor

in 1995.

The state's Republican congressmen were split over whether to oppose Duke publicly. Three of the four incumbent Republicans--James McCrery, John Cooksey, and Richard Baker--took a hands-off position, with only Billy Tauzin issuing an open appeal against the former Klansman. Outgoing Congressman Livingston, who had earlier pledged neutrality, endorsed Treen in an effort to prevent Duke from winning the seat.

After the May 2 vote, Treen praised Duke as a vigorous campaigner and suggested that he had run so well because of "moderating" his views. In reality, Duke only missed the runoff because the Republican Party has embraced the political agenda which he employed in his earlier and more successful campaigns.

As Thomas Edsall noted May 1 in the *Washington Post*: "Republicans in Washington and Baton Rouge have in the years since Duke's heyday in the early 1990s enacted much of his agenda on welfare reform, affirmative action, tuition assistance for the working middle class and immigration restrictions."

The Louisiana election thus provides another indication of the extent to which the Republican Party has become transformed into a vehicle for semi-fascist and racist elements like Duke and the Mississippi-based Council of Conservative Citizens.



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