

Fundamentalist anti-evolution candidates defeated in Kansas state election

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In a sharp blow to the extreme-right Christian fundamentalist groups, voters in the August 1 Republican primary for the Kansas Board of Education defeated three of the four candidates who supported restrictions on the teaching of evolution in the state's public schools.

On August 11, 1999 the Board of Education rejected by a 6-4 vote the proposed science teaching guidelines drawn up by a committee of 27 teachers and administrators, and adopted instead a plan drafted in secret by the right-wing majority, under the influence of a fundamentalist group called the Creation Science Association of Mid-America (CSAMA).

The new rules did not explicitly outlaw the teaching of evolution, but made it optional, at the discretion of each local school board. More importantly, the rules prohibited including questions on tests about either evolution or the big-bang theory of cosmology. This tactic is favored by fundamentalist and "creation science" advocates so as to evade Supreme Court decisions that have overturned outright bans on the teaching of evolution as well as so-called equal time provisions that require giving equal emphasis to evolution and religion-based creationism.

In the year since the Kansas decision, which was widely denounced by science and education groups, measures limiting the teaching of evolution have been taken in Oklahoma, Kentucky and Alabama, but rejected in New Hampshire, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and other states. New Mexico education authorities banned the teaching of creationism and explicitly endorsed evolution.

In the highest-profile Republican primary contest, board chairwoman Linda Holloway, who played a leading role in imposing the anti-evolution policy, was defeated by a margin of 60 percent to 40 percent,

despite outspending her opponent three to one. Sue Gamble, a local school board member in the Kansas City suburb of Shawnee Mission, won 24,590 votes compared to Holloway's 16,215. Holloway spent nearly \$90,000, including \$35,000 on television advertising, an unprecedented amount for a state board of education primary contest.

In the other contests, another right-wing incumbent, Mary Douglass Brown of Wichita, who voted for the anti-evolution standards, was defeated by former Wichita school board member Carol Rupe, by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent. The evolution decision was the only issue in the race.

A third right-wing board member who voted for the anti-evolution standards, Scott Hill of Abilene, moved out of state and did not run for reelection. Attorney Bruce Wyatt won the Republican nomination to succeed Hill over a fundamentalist anti-evolution candidate, Brad Angell, receiving 18,420 votes to Angell's 13,602.

In the fourth contest, board vice-chairman Steve Abrams, a religious conservative who voted to limit the teaching of evolution, won renomination with 62 percent of the vote.

While all those nominated face contests in the general election in November, the primary vote was widely publicized and viewed as a major political event. Many voters changed their registration from Democratic or independent in order to vote in the primary. The state Republican Party leadership was split, with Governor Bill Graves backing the pro-evolution candidates and Senator Sam Brownback supporting the fundamentalists.

In the weeks before the August 1 vote, the issue of evolution dominated public discussion in Kansas. Supporters of the scientific theory staged a week-long

series of events July 9-15 to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the infamous Scopes “Monkey Trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, when a high school biology teacher was prosecuted for teaching Darwinism.

The right-wing board of education members openly appealed to religious prejudice and backwardness, and displayed their own abysmal ignorance of the science they have sought to suppress. Mary Douglass Brown, the board member from Wichita who was defeated for renomination, declared in one interview, “I don't believe that humans descended from apes, no. How come there's still apes running around loose and there are humans? Why did some of them decide to evolve and some did not?”

The repudiation of these views by voters, not even in a general election, but in a Republican primary, is a clear indication that the fundamentalists lack any broad base of popular support. Their advances in recent years have been due to the rightward shift of the bourgeois political establishment, and what amounts to the disenfranchisement of the majority of the population by a political system controlled by big business.



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