

US: Democrats lose two more governorships in off-year elections

Patrick Martin
7 November 2003

Following its debacle in last month's California recall election, the Democratic Party lost two more state governorships in off-year elections November 4. Republican candidates ousted the incumbent Democratic governor in Mississippi and defeated the Democratic state attorney general in Kentucky in the race to succeed outgoing Democratic Governor Paul Patton.

Both Republican candidates won easily: Congressman Ernie Fletcher defeated Attorney General A.B. Chandler by 55 to 45 percent in Kentucky; former Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour defeated Governor Ronnie Musgrove by 53 to 45 percent in Mississippi.

The two southern states voted for Bush by wide margins in the 2000 elections and Republicans dominate their congressional delegations, holding both US Senate seats in each state, five out of six House seats in Kentucky and three out of four House seats in Mississippi. But in state politics conservative Democrats control the state legislatures and had held the governorships.

In a preview of the pattern to be expected in the 2004 elections, both national parties poured enormous amounts of money into the state campaigns. More than \$19 million was expended in Mississippi, three times the previous record, with Barbour, a well-heeled Washington lobbyist, spending nearly \$11 million.

These massive outlays—and a series of campaign rallies in both states featuring George W. Bush—did not evoke much response from the voting public. Voter turnout actually declined in Kentucky, from 44.4 percent in 1995, the last closely contested governor's race, to 39.8 percent this year. The turnout in Mississippi was virtually unchanged from the last gubernatorial campaign.

The results in each case demonstrated that the Democratic Party is incapable of capitalizing on the rising popular opposition to the war in Iraq and to the growth of unemployment and social inequality. Both states have

been devastated by the decline in US manufacturing, losing more than 60,000 jobs apiece since Bush entered the White House. Kentucky's coal-mining areas and Mississippi's northeastern counties, a center of the furniture industry, are particularly hard-hit. But the Democrats offered no alternative to the policies of the Bush administration, running right-wing campaigns emphasizing fiscal prudence and the need to provide incentives for corporate investors.

In Kentucky, where 30 years of Democratic control of the statehouse came to an end, outgoing Governor Patton was mired in a seedy personal scandal in which he had admitted to rewarding his mistress with state contracts, and then trying to revoke the contracts after she dumped him.

In Mississippi, the Republicans won the governorship with a candidate whose profession—lobbyist in Washington for the tobacco companies and other giant corporate interests—was hardly calculated to inspire popular enthusiasm in the poorest state in the country.

The Mississippi Democratic Party establishment virtually handed the race to Barbour. Lieutenant Governor Amy Tuck, elected with Musgrove in 1999 as a Democrat, switched parties late last year and ran for reelection as a Republican. Musgrove himself virtually ran as an independent, not identifying himself in campaign literature as a Democrat and avoiding any association with other state Democrats and any criticism of the Bush administration.

In the final days of the campaign, he issued a statement denouncing Democrats in the US Senate who successfully filibustered to block the elevation of Mississippi federal District Judge Charles Pickering for a seat on the Circuit Court of Appeals. Pickering's intervention to insure lenient treatment of a white man convicted of a cross-burning on the lawn of an interracial couple was a major issue in the defeat of his nomination.

The Republican campaign in Mississippi made heavy use of barely disguised appeals to white racism. Barbour prominently displayed a Confederate flag pin and his supporters targeted Musgrove for agreeing to put a proposal on the ballot several years ago to remove the Confederate emblem from the state flag. The ballot measure was heavily defeated. Barbour's unofficial campaign slogan was "Keep the flag. Change the governor."

At one point during the fall campaign, it was revealed that the Council of Conservative Citizens—the racist successor organization to the White Citizens' Councils that organized opposition to desegregation in the 1960s—was featuring photos of Barbour on its web site. Barbour publicly rejected demands that he disassociate himself from the group, which has close ties to Mississippi's most powerful politician, Senator Trent Lott, the former majority leader.

While the two parties split the eight statewide offices that were on the ballot, four apiece, the two Democratic candidates who were black both lost. In those two races, Republican campaign ads invariably featured photos of the Democratic candidates, in order to drive home the racial message. Mississippi has the highest percentage of blacks of any state, and the largest number of black local elected officials, but no black person has been elected to statewide office since Reconstruction.

Tuesday's balloting also included state legislative and local races in widely scattered parts of the country. The Democratic Party increased its majority in the New Jersey state House of Representatives and won control of the state senate, giving them full control of the state government for the first time in nearly two decades.

In the New York City suburbs, Democrats won county executive positions in Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties, with a combined population of over 4 million people. The Democratic candidate also won for county executive in Fairfax County, Virginia, the largest jurisdiction in the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

In Philadelphia, the fifth largest US city, Democratic Mayor John Street won reelection easily, beating Republican Sam Katz, who nearly defeated him in 1999. The election was close until early October, when the FBI bugging of Street's office was disclosed. The electronic surveillance, supposedly in pursuit of an investigation into corruption in the awarding of municipal contracts, was widely viewed as a "dirty trick" by the Bush administration on behalf of the Republican campaign. Such bugging of a high public official would require the

personal approval of both Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller.

The overall results confirmed the pattern of regional polarization shown in the 2000 national election, with Republicans leading in the South and Democrats in the Northeast. But the balance sheet of the 2003 vote was overwhelmingly negative for the Democrats, especially given their loss of the governorship of California, the largest US state. The Republicans currently control 29 of the 50 states, with 60 percent of the US population, despite the deep unpopularity of their domestic policies and the growing anxiety over the war in Iraq.

Democratic Party officials went to absurd lengths to downplay the significance of the results of the November 4 vote. Governor Gary Locke of Washington, chairman of the Democratic Governors' Association, tried to argue that the debacle for Democratic candidates in Mississippi and Kentucky was actually a positive for his party.

The poor performance of the US economy "has triggered a strong anti-incumbent mood in the electorate," he said. "National Republicans should take no joy in what was really a vote to change the status quo. This is an unsettled electorate looking for change, and that mood is likely to linger through next year's presidential election."

Locke sounded uncannily like Bush himself, when he sought to portray the guerrilla attacks in Baghdad as proof of American success in Iraq. He did not attempt to explain why the Democrats were unable to appeal to popular dissatisfaction with the economy—and the devastating impact of Bush administration policies on state government budgets—in the course of this fall's campaigns.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact