

US: Republicans lose House seat in Kentucky special election

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In an election result that confirms a sharp shift in public opinion against the Bush administration, a Democratic candidate won a special election Tuesday to fill a vacancy in the House of Representatives, taking a seat in the Lexington, Kentucky area held for the last six years by the Republicans.

Former state attorney general Ben Chandler won the sixth congressional district seat easily, defeating Republican State Senator Alice Forgy Kerr. Chandler will fill out the remainder of the term of Republican Congressman Ernie Fletcher, who defeated Chandler in the race for governor of Kentucky last fall. Chandler will be a heavy favorite to retain the seat for a full two-year term in the upcoming general election November 2.

The race took on national significance, as both the Democratic and Republican parties poured in staff and money, expending over \$4 million to win a seat the victor would hold for only ten months. National Republican leaders like House Speaker Dennis Hastert campaigned for Kerr.

It was the first Democratic victory in a special election for a formerly Republican congressional seat since 1991, before the Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives in the 1994 general election.

The Democratic victory cuts the Republican margin in the House to 228-205, with one independent and one vacancy. The Republicans are expected to lose another seat in South Dakota, where a special election has been called for June 1 to replace Republican Congressman William Janklow, who resigned after being convicted of vehicular manslaughter.

There are some instructive comparisons between Tuesday's vote and the results of the gubernatorial election, held only three months ago with the same

Democratic candidate, Chandler, on the ballot. Voter turnout was high for a special election. While the press had estimated that as few as 10 percent of those eligible to vote would cast ballots, the actual figure was 35 percent of registered voters.

Last November, in the gubernatorial race, Chandler lost the sixth congressional district by a margin of 91,622 to 115,370. Tuesday he won the same area by 84,545 to 65,774. In the governor's race, Chandler lost 14 of the 16 counties around Lexington that comprise the sixth congressional district. Tuesday he won 14 of the 16.

Fletcher won the governor's race with heavy support from the national Republican Party, including several campaign appearances by President Bush. Kerr initially attempted the same strategy in the special election, taping a campaign commercial in which she was seen walking along a White House promenade with Bush and pledging to support the administration's policies.

According to local political commentators, however, this stance backfired as Bush plunged in national opinion polls during January and the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination attracted public attention. The national Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee spent nearly \$150,000 to identify strongly anti-Bush voters and mobilize 30,000 of them to vote February 17, urging them to "send George Bush a message" by voting for Chandler.

A typically right-wing representative of the southern Democrats, grandson of former governor A. B. (Happy) Chandler, who was later commissioner of baseball, Chandler is an unlikely vehicle for an anti-Bush message. In both his gubernatorial and congressional campaigns Chandler, who was state auditor for four years and state attorney general for eight, emphasized his fiscal conservatism and law-and-order credentials.

State Democratic Party Chairman Bill Barmer said that Kerr was “hitching herself to Bush’s wagon very closely.” He added: “She basically told the electorate that she was going to go to Washington and be an able assistant to the president, so she put Bush’s policies into play.”

When she was first selected as the Republican candidate in December, Kerr had expressed the desire for Bush to come to Kentucky to campaign for her. Ultimately, such an appearance was scrapped and Kerr even deleted references to Bush in some of her campaign ads.

Chandler said he also benefited from the reaction among state employees to budget cuts proposed by Fletcher after he entered the governor’s mansion. Many state workers live in the Lexington area and the state capital, the small town of Frankfort, is also in the district.



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