

# Democrats win Republican House seat in Louisiana special election

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A Democrat was elected Saturday in the congressional district centered around Baton Rouge, Louisiana, winning a seat in the House of Representatives held by the Republicans for the last 33 years. The victory was the second in two months in conservative, largely rural districts, indicating that the unpopularity of the Bush administration is translating into a huge swing against the congressional Republicans.

With about 100,000 voters turning out in the 6th Congressional District of Louisiana, State Rep. Donald J. Cazayoux received 49 percent of the vote to 46 percent for Republican Woody Jenkins, a former state representative and four-time candidate for statewide office, who was much better known when the campaign began.

The special election was called because the incumbent Republican congressman, Richard Baker, resigned to become a highly paid Washington lobbyist. Cazayoux will fill Baker's seat in the current Congress and becomes the frontrunner to win a full two-year term in the November general election, against Jenkins or some other Republican opponent.

The Republican Party retained the other Louisiana seat contested on May 3, the 1st Congressional District in the suburbs of New Orleans. The incumbent Republican, Bobby Jindal, resigned his seat after he was elected governor of the state last November. State Sen. Steve Scalise defeated college professor Gilda Reed by a margin of 75 percent to 23 percent.

Most state and national media attention, however, was on the more competitive 6th District race, which became a proxy fight between the national Democratic and Republican parties. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the Cazayoux campaign, allowing him to significantly outspend his Republican rival.

The National Republican Congressional Committee

(NRCC) only struck back in the last week, as polls showed Jenkins trailing. The NRCC and several Republican-linked conservative lobbies bought \$1 million in TV and radio commercials linking Cazayoux to Democratic presidential frontrunner Barack Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and accusing the Democrat, a conservative former prosecutor, of supporting a "radical agenda."

Cazayoux is a staunch opponent of abortion rights, has an "A" rating from the National Rifle Association for his opposition to gun regulation, and campaigned on his law-and-order record. These right-wing credentials endeared him to the national Democratic leadership, which recruited him to run for the open congressional seat and poured money into his campaign.

While Cazayoux campaigned as a conservative, he actually trailed the Republican Jenkins in the rural and suburban parts of the district east of Baton Rouge, the state capital. He made up this deficit and ultimately outpolled Jenkins based on ballots cast in the city, particularly in the predominantly black working class areas, where many voters are former residents of New Orleans displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Jenkins was also damaged by publicity about past links to David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan leader, who won several local elections as a Republican candidate and was an unsuccessful Republican candidate for governor in 1991. Jenkins's 1996 US Senate campaign was fined by the Federal Elections Commission for concealing payments to a phone bank operation set up by Duke.

When the blizzard of Republican commercials began, tying Cazayoux to Obama and Pelosi, the Democratic candidate sought to distance himself from the national party leaders, while touting his own record "of building coalitions across party lines." He even suggested that he might not vote for Pelosi's reelection as House Speaker, but would back a fellow conservative Democrat from

Louisiana, Charlie Melancon.

As a newly elected congressman, Cazayoux automatically becomes a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, although he has declined to express support either for Obama or for Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama won the Louisiana primary in February.

The Louisiana 6th District is the second long-held Republican seat to fall to the Democrats in a special election this year. It follows the victory March 8 of Bill Foster, who won the northern Illinois seat resigned by former House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

A third seat could change hands shortly in Mississippi. Democrat Travis Childers led Republican Greg Davis in the first round vote held April 22, missing outright victory by a few hundred votes. A runoff in that contest takes place Tuesday, May 13.

The incumbent Republican congressman, Roger Wicker, was appointed to fill the vacancy in the US Senate left by the retirement of former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. Like Congressman Baker in Louisiana, Lott stepped down to take a lucrative position as a Washington lobbyist.

Davis has been running campaign commercials picturing his Democratic opponent with Obama and Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a transparent effort to whip up racism in a largely rural, predominately white northern Mississippi district. Childers, a local government official, responded with ads denying that he had accepted Obama's endorsement and declaring that he had never met the prospective Democratic presidential nominee.

Like the districts in Illinois and Louisiana, the 1st Congressional District of Mississippi has voted heavily for Republican candidates in recent presidential elections. The loss of this seat would further undermine morale among congressional Republicans, who have already effectively conceded that the Democrats will retain control of both the House and Senate in the November elections, likely with increased margins.



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