

Republicans lose Mississippi House seat despite anti-Obama campaign

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In a contest widely viewed as an indicator of the November general election, the Republican Party lost the runoff vote for a House seat in northeast Mississippi, with Democrat Travis Childers easily defeating his Republican opponent Greg Davis.

Childers, the chancery clerk of Prentiss County (a position roughly equivalent to controller), had 57,276 votes compared to 49,314 votes for Davis, mayor of Southaven, a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee. Voter turnout was high for a special election.

The First Congressional District of Mississippi had been held by the Republican Party since 1995, but the seat fell vacant when the incumbent Roger Wicker was elevated to the US Senate after the resignation of former majority leader Trent Lott, who quit to become a highly paid Washington lobbyist.

Childers will enter Congress immediately, serving out the remaining eight months of Wicker's term. He will face Davis again in the November general election for a full two-year term.

The result was the third major defeat for Republican candidates in congressional special elections in recent months, following the loss of the seat of former House speaker Dennis Hastert in Illinois March 8, and the loss of a Baton Rouge, Louisiana seat May 3. Each of the three districts had voted heavily for President Bush in 2004.

The Mississippi district was the most conservative of the three, but the result Tuesday showed a huge 20 percent swing against the Republican Party. Davis took only 46 percent of the vote, compared to 66 percent for Wicker in his last reelection campaign in 2006.

In the runoff, Childers actually increased his margin of victory from the first round held April 22, when he polled 49 percent compared to 46 percent for Davis, with the rest divided among three other candidates.

Childers had fallen only 400 votes short of the 50 percent required for outright victory in the first round, making the two-man runoff necessary.

During the three weeks between the first round and the runoff, both the state and national Republican parties intervened heavily in an attempt to hold the seat. Wicker, Lott and Governor Haley Barbour campaigned for Davis, while the national party poured in \$1.3 million to buy commercials linking Childers to national Democrats like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and presidential frontrunner Barack Obama.

The First District was bombarded with recorded telephone calls from President Bush, who carried the district with 62 percent of the vote in 2004, as well as from Laura Bush and Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. Defeated presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, former governor of neighboring Arkansas, also put in an appearance.

The day before the vote, Vice President Dick Cheney campaigned in Davis's home town of Southaven, declaring, "What we need in Washington is a strong conservative congressman from Mississippi, not another Democrat going to bat for Nancy Pelosi." Davis introduced Cheney with a blast against Pelosi, Obama and Senator John Kerry, calling them "liberals with liberal ideas who do not represent our Mississippi values."

The district is largely rural and lower income, including only a few small cities like Tupelo and Columbus, as well as Oxford, home of the University of Mississippi, and one sizeable suburban area, DeSoto County, adjacent to Memphis. While most local government officials are conservative Democrats, the district has voted for Republican presidential candidates since the civil rights era, when it was the

scene of fierce battles over desegregation.

Both parties played to this heritage of racism in the final days of the campaign. The Davis campaign ran television ads portraying the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's former pastor, criticizing Childers for not publicly denouncing Wright and claiming that Obama had endorsed Childers. Childers denied any contact with the Obama campaign and declared himself a "Mississippi Democrat," presenting himself as a representative of rural values against his suburban Republican opponent. (Childers speaks with a strong Southern drawl, while Davis does not).

The anti-Obama campaign appeared to produce a backlash among black voters, who comprise 27 percent of the district. There was increased turnout among rural black voters compared to the April 22 first-round vote, and Childers carried 20 of the 24 counties in the district compared to only 16 counties three weeks ago. Black turnout was also spurred by reports that Davis had supported the placing of a statue of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan, in Southaven.

While presenting himself as a conservative on cultural issues like abortion and gun control, Childers adopted the economic populist demagogic of the national Democratic Party, including opposition to free trade agreements and denunciations of big business. He criticized the war in Iraq from the standpoint that it was diverting resources that could be better spent at home.

In a written statement issued on the day of Cheney's visit, Childers said, "Greg Davis votes to raise taxes on oil, takes thousands from Big Oil companies and today brings Big Oil's best friend, Dick Cheney, to North Mississippi."

Childers was also sustained by enormous financial support from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which spent more than \$1.5 million on the race.

The cumulative result of the three congressional special elections, in Illinois, Louisiana and Mississippi, has been to greatly undermine Republican morale and prospects for the general election. The two parties spent nearly \$5 million apiece on the three races, but from very unequal bankrolls: according to figures filed with the Federal Election Commission, the House Democrats had raised \$44.3 million through March 31, compared to only \$7.1 million for the House

Republicans.

The chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, issued a warning after the Mississippi vote that Republican candidates needed "to take stock of their campaigns and position themselves for challenging campaigns this fall... The political environment is such that voters remain pessimistic about the direction of the country and the Republican Party in general."

Some 25 Republicans have already decided to retire or resign from the House of Representatives, more than one in ten of the Republican caucus. Nearly all these open seats are vulnerable to a Democratic takeover in November. The mood on Capitol Hill was summed up by one Republican aide who told *Politico.com* last week, "If we don't win in Mississippi, I think you are going to see a lot of people running around here looking for windows to jump out of."

The Mississippi result came as a shock not only to the Republican Party, but to the Democrats and to much of the national media. On the eve of the vote, the *New York Times* wrote pessimistically that while an anti-Obama campaign had failed to shift voters in the Louisiana special election, "there are signs that here in Mississippi, with its tortured legacy of race-based politics, the tactic may be working, particularly in a district with a comparatively smaller black population than in Louisiana, 26 percent."

Childers himself told the *Times* that voters in his district believed the Republicans were "trying to play the race card." While his campaign claimed that its internal polling showed the contest narrowing as a result of the anti-Obama ads, Childers' margin actually increased.



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