

Mixed results from primary elections in four US states

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Primary elections in four US states represented a rebuff to the political establishment in both the Democratic and Republican parties, while suggesting that the outcome of the November congressional elections remains very much in doubt, despite media predictions of a likely Republican sweep.

The mixed results of Tuesday's voting demonstrate that popular illusions in the Obama administration have largely evaporated, 18 months after his landslide victory in the presidential elections. Most important, but least noted in the media coverage, is the virtual collapse in voter turnout, an indication that for tens of millions of working people, in the second year of the deepest slump since the Great Depression, neither of the two parties of big business holds any broad appeal.

In the Pennsylvania primary, Senator Arlen Specter was defeated for the Democratic nomination by Congressman Joe Sestak, a retired admiral. Despite a heated campaign, voter turnout statewide declined by 55 percent from the 2008 presidential primary in which Hillary Clinton defeated Obama, and turnout in the state's largest city, Philadelphia, fell 63 percent.

Under the US two-party system, primary elections are held to decide the nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties. This process gives big business two opportunities to manipulate the electoral process in its own interests: first, in the selection of the Democratic and Republican nominees, in elections which are frequently limited to those registered as members of the two parties; then, in the general election, when the standard practice is to limit media coverage to the candidates of the two officially sanctioned parties.

Candidates and perspectives outside the two-party system are systematically excluded from media coverage. Intense publicity has been given to the right-wing opposition to the Obama administration, presented as a populist opposition to "socialism" and "big government," while the actual feelings of tens of millions of working people are ignored and suppressed.

A recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, for instance, found that among Democratic voters, one third expressed the view that Democratic members of Congress are "more concerned about the interests of large corporations" than those of average Americans. This only gives a hint of the seething class

antagonisms in the United States, which go without the slightest representation in official Washington.

In many states it is impossible, as a practical matter, to gain ballot status as an independent candidate, except for those candidates possessed of great personal wealth—like H. Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996—a "qualification" that immediately renders them legitimate in the eyes of the political establishment.

The result is that few people can run for the Senate, the US upper house, without a campaign war chest in multi-millions, while a campaign for the House of Representatives, the lower house, requires at least several million dollars. This applies to primary campaigns as well. Sestak, the victorious candidate in Tuesday's Democratic primary for US Senate in Pennsylvania, was considered underfunded since he had "only" \$4 million to spend on television commercials.

Specter was elected to five six-year terms in the Senate as a Republican, and was involved in the course of his long career in some of the most infamous episodes in American politics (see accompanying article). He switched to the Democratic Party last year after voting for the Obama economic stimulus bill, one of only three Republicans to do so, and it became clear he would lose a Republican primary to seek a sixth term.

Sestak, first elected to Congress in 2006, ran in the face of opposition from the entire Democratic Party leadership, both national and state. Specter also had the backing of the state AFL-CIO union federation and the black Democratic Party leadership in Philadelphia. Trailing in the polls until the last month, Sestak began an advertising campaign tying Specter to George W. Bush, Sarah Palin and other national figures in the Republican Party, and presenting his switch to the Democratic Party as pure opportunism. Sestak ultimately won 54 percent of the vote to Specter's 46 percent, carrying all but three of the state's 83 counties.

While claiming that his victory was "A win for the people over the establishment, over the status quo, even over Washington, D.C.," Sestak is himself a product of the Pentagon brass, retiring after 31 years in the Navy with the rank of rear admiral. If elected in November over Republican Pat Toomey, a conservative former congressman, Sestak would be the highest-ranking former military officer to serve in the US

Senate.

Although he won a suburban Philadelphia congressional seat in 2006 at least in part because of his criticism of the war in Iraq, Sestak is a firm supporter of Obama's escalation of the war in Afghanistan, and commanded a carrier battle group that supported US military operations there during the Bush administration.

The other high-profile contest in Pennsylvania was a special election in the 12th congressional district in the southwest part of the state, vacated by the death of longtime Democratic incumbent John Murtha. A senior aide to Murtha, Mark Critz, defeated Republican businessman William Burns, a protégé of the right-wing Tea Party movement, by a margin of 53 percent to 45 percent.

The 12th district stretches from the working-class eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh to the devastated industrial and coal-mining areas around Johnstown. It was the only congressional district in the United States to vote for Democrat presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004 and switch to Republican John McCain in 2008. This led Republican Party spokesmen and media pundits to target the seat as a likely Republican takeover.

If Burns had been victorious, there is no doubt that the special election would have been hailed by the media as another signal of an impending Republican sweep in 2010, along the lines of the Massachusetts special election to the US Senate won by Republican Scott Brown. It was noticeable that the retention of the seat by the Democrats was comparatively downplayed in the media coverage. It was the sixth consecutive congressional special election won by the Democrats, going back to early 2008.

The result was certainly no victory for Obama. Critz ran as far away from the administration as possible, publicly declaring that he would have voted against the Obama health care plan, unlike Murtha, who supported it. He also staked out a conservative position on "social" issues like abortion and gun control, while allying himself to the trade union bureaucracy with a strident nationalistic attack on imports and outsourcing.

In Kentucky, Rand Paul, an ophthalmologist and son of former Libertarian and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul, won the Republican primary for US senate. Paul's easy victory, by a margin of 59 percent to 35 percent, was a blow to Senate Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, the leader of the state's Republican establishment, who backed state Secretary of State Trey Grayson for the nomination.

Paul proclaimed his allegiance to the right-wing Tea Party faction of the Republicans, although he has many policy differences, including opposition, from an isolationist standpoint, to the US military intervention in Iraq. He will face state Attorney General Jack Conway in the general election. Conway won the Democratic primary by a narrow margin over Lieutenant Governor Daniel Mongiardo.

The primary loss was a particular humiliation to McConnell because he effectively forced the retirement of Senator Jim

Bunning, another right-wing Republican, and picked Grayson to replace him. It also follows by ten days the defeat of incumbent Republican Senator Robert Bennett of Utah, a McConnell ally, who was denied renomination by the state Republican convention in favor of two even more right-wing candidates.

The media gave Paul's victory top billing in its coverage, along with Specter's defeat, in order to sustain the fiction that the Tea Party represents some sort of mass right-wing popular movement. But Paul held his victory party at a Kentucky country club, a venue that says far more about the real social interests he defends than his right-wing populist rhetoric against the bailout of Wall Street. He is also a vocal supporter of raising the age of eligibility for Social Security, and making other cuts in benefits for retired workers.

In Arkansas, there was another setback for the Obama White House, as incumbent Senator Blanche Lincoln failed to win the necessary 50 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary, and now faces a June 8 runoff with her main challenger, Lieutenant Governor Bill Halter.

Lincoln was targeted by the state AFL-CIO and the liberal group Move-on.org, partly because of her opposition to the Employee Free Choice Act and the public option on health care, partly because polls showed her likely to lose the general election to Republican congressman John Boozman.

In the primary election, with a turnout of less than one-third of those eligible to vote, Lincoln edged Halter by 43 percent to 42 percent, with an ultra-right anti-abortion, anti-immigrant candidate taking the balance of the vote. The runoff June 8 will decide the Democratic nominee.

A primary for statewide offices was held in Oregon as well, but without any major contests. Former governor John Kitzhaber won the Democratic nomination for governor, and will face a former professional basketball player, Chris Dudley, who won the Republican nomination over a candidate backed by the Tea Party groups.



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