

US primaries: Millionaire candidates, right-wing politics and few voters

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26 August 2010

Democratic and Republican primaries held in five states on Tuesday were dominated by multi-millionaire candidates, right-wing politics and the participation of scant numbers of voters.

The primaries took place in five states—Arizona, Florida, Alaska, Vermont and Oklahoma—and are among the last to be staged before November’s midterm elections. They failed to produce the sweeping anti-incumbent movement widely predicted in the media and left the outcome of the upcoming general election very much in doubt. The results reconfirmed only one certainty: the politics of both big business parties are shifting rapidly to the right.

In the states with the most hotly contested races—Florida, Arizona and Alaska—election officials gave preliminary voter turnout estimates that were little changed from the last midterm primaries in 2006, hovering in all three states around the 20 percent mark. In Florida, the percentage of voters participating in the primaries was roughly half what was recorded in 2008.

The lack of any surge to the polls is indicative of the widespread hostility to both parties in the general population. It is also one more indication that the so-called “Tea Party” movement touted by the mass media is largely a creation of the media itself, representing little more than the most right-wing sections of the Republican Party.

The principal success attributed to this supposed movement Tuesday came in Alaska, where little-known Fairbanks attorney Joe Miller appeared poised to deprive incumbent Senator Lisa Murkowski of the Republican nomination. With barely 100,000 people voting in the contest, Miller had approximately a 1,500-vote lead, leaving the final outcome to be decided by still-uncounted mail ballots.

Murkowski was appointed to the Senate in 2002 by her father, Frank Murkowski, when he took office as Alaska governor, leaving his term in Washington unexpired. She subsequently won an election in 2004.

Miller, who was endorsed by former Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, campaigned against Murkowski’s vote for the 2008 bailout of the banks and her record of voting in favor of abortion rights. This latter issue was amplified by a ballot initiative that would require doctors to notify parents of teenage girls seeking abortions. The measure was thought to have brought out more Christian fundamentalist voters, who favored Miller over Murkowski.

If Murkowski is unseated, she will be the third US senator to lose a seat to a primary challenger in the current election cycle. A

count of the absentee ballots is not expected until next week.

A similar challenge in Arizona fell flat, however, with incumbent Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, beating his rival, another supposed Tea Party favorite, former congressman J.D. Hayworth, by a 24 percent margin.

McCain spent \$21 million in the race, while repudiating his former positions on immigration and other issues on which he had been challenged by the Republican right. He also conducted an ad campaign attacking his challenger as a “huckster” for his appearances in 2007 infomercials promising “free money” from the government in what many charged was a scam.

It was Florida, however, that saw the most consequential contests and also provided the starkest exposure of the depravity of America’s capitalist two-party system, dominated by big money, corruption and political reaction. The race for a vacant Senate seat could decide which party controls the body. The state also plays a pivotal role in presidential elections, and the race for governor has strong bearing on which party will dominate the redrawing of the electoral maps in 2012, a process that is traditionally used to gerrymander districts to favor either the Republicans or Democrats.

On the Republican side, the gubernatorial race pitted Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum against the multi-millionaire former hospital CEO Rick Scott in a battle to prove who could adopt the most right-wing position on issues such as immigration and abortion.

In the early stages of the campaign, Scott had attacked McCollum for failing to support the anti-immigrant law overturned by a Federal court in Arizona. McCollum sought to counter this challenge by crafting an even “tougher” law for Florida, one that would not only order local and state police to target undocumented immigrants, but also jail legal immigrants caught on the streets without their immigration documents. It would also allow courts to impose stiffer criminal sentences against immigrants than other defendants.

Some political analysts attributed McCollum’s defeat to anger over the proposed legislation within Florida’s substantial Cuban-American Republican base. Scott cynically attacked McCollum over his proposed bill, broadcasting campaign ads in Spanish calling it “disrespectful” to “our community.”

On the issue of abortion, McCollum ran to the right of Scott, attacking him for failing to oppose the right to abortion even in the

case of incest and rape.

Scott retaliated by dredging up a 20-year-old legal case stemming from the delivery of a premature infant at a hospital run by Columbia/HCA, the for-profit hospital chain that he founded.

In August 1990, Karla Miller and her husband Mark came to the hospital after she went into labor at just 23 weeks and complications placed her life in danger. With the fetus not expected to survive, the couple asked doctors at the hospital not to take any extraordinary measures that could cause the newborn pain.

The hospital overrode these wishes, however, and the infant survived. Suffering brain damage, cerebral palsy, blindness and seizures, the child required constant care. Having run out of insurance money for her care, the family sued the hospital corporation for failing to ask the parents' consent before treating the newborn. A jury awarded the family \$43 million in expenses and damages, but Columbia/HCA, on Scott's orders, appealed the verdict, managing to overturn it in a higher court.

Scott, incredibly, claimed that by denying the family money to care for their child, he had proved himself a "pro-life leader."

"We continued the case because I believed in the sanctity of life," he told the *Miami Herald*. Pressed by the newspaper about the details of the case, Scott responded, "I can't remember back. I don't know, it was so long ago."

The family denounced Scott for exploiting "our daughter's misfortune," while pointing out that the case had "absolutely nothing to do with abortion."

Selective amnesia is a consistent trait in the Republican primary winner. He similarly claimed inability to remember deals that led to the criminal prosecution of Columbia/HCA for the largest Medicare fraud case in US history. The company was forced to pay out \$1.7 billion in civil and criminal fines, and Scott himself was compelled to step down as CEO, but not before collecting a \$10 million severance package and \$300 million in stock options.

Scott reportedly spent up to \$50 million of this money—15 times as much as McCollum—effectively buying the Republican nomination.

In the November election, Scott will be facing Democrat Alex Sink, Florida's chief financial officer. Sink, who is married to prominent Florida attorney and the state's Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 2002, Bill McBride, was previously the president of Florida operations at Bank of America.

In that position, she oversaw a merger with the local NationsBank-Barnett, resulting in the wiping out of an estimated 6,000 jobs. While presiding over these mass layoffs, Sink garnered nearly \$9 million in salary and bonuses over a three-year period. The Republicans have run one TV spot highlighting this record and employing the catch-phrase "Not one of US." Given the similar class background of the party's nominee, however, she most certainly is.

In the race for the Senate seat being vacated by Florida Republican Senator Mel Martinez (who gave up his office to become a senior executive at JPMorgan Chase) Miami-area congressman Kendrick Meek defeated Palm Beach billionaire Jeff Greene.

Meek, a former state trooper, inherited his seat in Congress from

his mother, who retired from the US Congress in 2003. He has run unopposed in each of four congressional elections.

Meek has been implicated in multiple scandals, including his lobbying for Boston developer Dennis Stackhouse, who provided the congressman's mother with a free Cadillac and office space as well as tens of thousands of dollars in consulting fees before being arrested for misappropriation of over \$1 million in public funds. During his earlier career in the Florida state legislature, Meek continued to work for the Wackenhut Corp., which also hired his wife and mother as lobbyists, failing to recuse himself from votes on contracts with the private security firm.

Meek's rival for the Democratic nomination, Jeff Greene, cast himself as an "outsider" while spending tens of millions of dollars of his own money in his failed bid to buy the Senate seat. *Forbes*, put Greene's net worth at \$1.4 billion, a fortune made off of speculation in credit default swaps that paid off thanks to the misery of millions of people who lost their homes in the sub-prime mortgage meltdown.

The Republican nominee for Senator is Marco Rubio, a Cuban-American politician, who was the speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. Having been touted by the media as the potential "first Tea Party senator," Rubio failed to utter the words "Tea Party" in his acceptance speech Tuesday.

Running against him is not only Meek, but also Florida Governor Charlie Crist, who left the Republican Party to rebrand himself as an independent rather than face probable defeat in the primary. He has been leading both the Democratic and the Republican candidate in the polls.

Primaries were also held Tuesday in Vermont and Oklahoma. In Vermont, three elected state officials faced off in the Democratic gubernatorial primary, with state Senate President Pro Tem Peter Shumlin claiming victory by a bare 190-vote margin. Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie ran unopposed for the Republican nomination.

In Oklahoma, run-off primaries were held to choose two Republican candidates for House seats, with a 42-year-old former Christian youth camp leader, James Lankford, gaining the nomination for an open seat in the 5th District in Oklahoma City, and a 47-year-old veterinarian, Charles Thompson, winning the nomination to challenge a three-term Democratic incumbent in the 2nd District in the east of the state.



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