

Republicans win US by-elections in New York, Nevada

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The US Republican Party won two congressional special elections in widely disparate districts September 13, one a longtime Democratic seat in New York City, the other a longtime Republican seat in rural Nevada.

The New York City defeat was a particular blow to the Democrats and the Obama administration, which poured in resources in the last two weeks in a failed attempt to defend a seat that has been held by the Democratic Party for the past 91 years.

Turnout in both elections was extremely low—only 32 percent in the Nevada Second Congressional District and perhaps as low as 20 percent in the New York Ninth Congressional District, which includes parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

Less than one third of those who voted in the Ninth District in 2008, a presidential election year, bothered to go to the polls September 13.

Previous members of the House of Representatives from that district include Geraldine Ferraro, who was the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 1984, and Charles Schumer, now the senior US Senator from New York.

Both special elections were the byproducts of sex scandals, which each party handled in a fashion typical of its overall political physiognomy.

In Nevada, Republican Senator John Ensign sought to brazen out a genuine corruption scandal that came to light after he admitted an affair with the wife of his former chief of staff, which culminated in six-figure payoffs to both his mistress and her husband.

Only in the face of mounting evidence that that his wealthy parents, multi-millionaires in the casino industry, had participated in the payoffs did Ensign finally agree to resign. He delayed the resignation until after Republican Governor Jim Gibbons, himself in disgrace for a series of scandals, was replaced by

another Republican, Brian Sandoval, who could be trusted by the party establishment to name a reliable successor.

Sandoval named Congressman Dean Heller to replace Ensign in the US Senate, and the special election was held to fill Heller's seat in the House. The Republicans maintained lockstep discipline throughout the tawdry Ensign affair, which dragged out over several years, never demanding the senator's resignation until his successor and his successor's replacement were lined up.

In contrast, when a media-driven scandal blew up around Congressman Anthony Weiner last June, relating not to financial corruption or even sexual activity, but merely the posting of crude and juvenile photographs on the Internet, the Democratic Party immediately capitulated to a right-wing media witch-hunt, and House Democratic leaders demanded Weiner's resignation.

Robert Turner, the Republican victor in New York, by a margin of 53 percent to 47 percent, is a retired cable television executive, a former producer of the Jerry Springer and Phil Donahue talk shows. He defeated Democrat David Weprin, a former New York state assemblyman and the son of a former New York State assembly speaker, who was the selection of the Democratic Party organization in Queens. Weprin raised far more money than Turner and was also helped by an infusion of some \$600,000 from the Democratic National Committee.

Both parties responded predictably to the upset victory, with Republicans hailing it as an omen for 2012, and particularly the Obama reelection campaign, and Democrats downplaying its broader significance.

The first thing to be noted is that the election would never have been necessary if not for the typical

Democratic Party combination of cowardice and complicity with the right wing exhibited last June, after Weiner admitted to sending suggestive photos of himself and “sexting” with several women in online exchanges.

While the scandal was driven by a small group of ultra-right Internet activists, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then Obama himself stepped in to force Weiner out. (See “Barack Obama intervenes in the Weiner affair,” 15 June 2011.)

The most important element in the New York City result, and one which elicits virtually no comment in the big business media, is the collapse of the Democratic base vote.

The Republican victor, Turner, received only 32,000 votes Tuesday, well below the number of votes he received as a badly beaten loser in 2010, when Weiner defeated him and won reelection by a 20 percentage-point margin.

For obvious reasons, most of those enthusiastic over Obama’s election less than three years ago, including many first-time voters, have long since lost their enthusiasm. As demonstrated in the 2010 midterm elections, millions are now opting for abstention because their conditions of life are worsening and they see no difference between the candidates.

There are undoubtedly other voters who go to the polls out of habit. This year, increasingly angry and desperate over the deepening economic crisis, they cast protest votes for the Republican, not because they agree with his right-wing policies but in order to “send a message” of dissatisfaction and frustration.

There are other political issues, particularly the prostration of both capitalist parties before the right-wing regime in Israel. Zionist groups sought to whip up hysteria among Jewish voters, who comprise 40 percent of the Ninth District, using the tensions between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu over Obama’s reference to the 1967 borders as the basis for talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The nomination of Weprin, in fact, was a cynical attempt by the Democrats to cater to the same reactionary politics. Democratic Party officials thought that their candidate, an orthodox Jew, would profit from the fact that his opponent was Catholic. But several prominent pro-Zionist Democrats, notably Ed Koch, the 86-year-old former mayor of New York,

endorsed the Republican as a way of punishing Obama for allegedly trying to “throw Israel under a bus.”

None of these factors by themselves would have made a decisive difference, however, without the record and role of the Democratic Party, underlined over and over again in recent months. Weprin’s lackluster campaign, pathetic even by the usual standards, was an appropriate reflection of the paralysis and decay of this party, which was once able to pose as the friend of working people but can no longer do so even in one of its former strongholds.

The election results, rather than reflecting a shift to the right among broader layers of the population, demonstrate the growing alienation from the bourgeois political establishment as a whole.

Less than four months ago, in another special election in New York State, one also occasioned by a petty sex scandal that forced the resignation of a member of Congress, the Republicans lost a seat that they had held for 40 years, this time in what was considered a safe Republican district upstate. The Democratic candidate won after attacking the Republicans’ efforts to dismantle Medicare. (see “Republicans lose House seat in special election,” 26 May 2011.)

The vote in the district outside Buffalo showed widespread popular opposition to cuts in Medicare and Social Security. In the months since, however, Obama and the Democrats have themselves openly targeted the same entitlement programs for cuts, as part of the ongoing deficit reduction negotiations with the congressional Republicans.



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