

US primary elections show low level of popular interest

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Primary elections Tuesday in seven US states were marked by poor turnouts and low levels of popular interest in contests in both the Republican and Democratic parties. There was statewide voting in Colorado, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, New York and Utah, as well as a congressional special election in Florida.

The two contests that drew the bulk of US media attention—a Republican Senate runoff election in Mississippi and a Democratic congressional contest in New York City—demonstrate in different ways the reactionary character of the US two-party system.

In the runoff election in Mississippi, the Republican US senator from Mississippi, Thad Cochran, narrowly defeated an ultra-right challenger, State Senator Chris McDaniel. McDaniel had an edge of nearly 2,000 votes over Cochran in primary voting on June 3, but because of a third challenger, neither candidate reached the required 50 percent of the vote, forcing the runoff June 24.

Voter turnout typically is much lower in a runoff, which was expected to give McDaniel the advantage, but the reverse took place in Mississippi. Turnout rose from 319,000 in the first round to 376,000 in the runoff. McDaniel's vote increased by 30,000, but Cochran's vote rose 38,000, giving him an edge of 6,788 votes, 50.8 percent to 49.2 percent.

The Cochran campaign responded to the near-defeat in the June 3 primary by emphasizing Cochran's status as one of a handful of military veterans still in Congress and his backing for the vast array of military bases in Mississippi, one of the biggest employers in the most impoverished American state. Senator John McCain, one of the leading warmongers in Washington, was brought in for a rally on Cochran's behalf.

Cochran also collected the endorsement of the Metal Trades Council at the huge Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which employs 6,000 workers, mainly building and refitting Navy warships.

In addition, Cochran benefited from a full-scale mobilization of the resources of the Republican Party establishment, as well as the US Chamber of Commerce and numerous corporate lobbies, which poured money and personnel into Mississippi for a three-week effort to save his seat.

Despite this, McDaniel still considerably outspent the incumbent senator, benefiting from the backing of right-wing billionaires such as the Koch brothers, the principal financiers of the bogus “grass roots” Tea Party campaign. McDaniel spent at least \$3 million more than Cochran, usually a decisive advantage in such a contest.

The critical difference in the runoff was Cochran's open appeal for the support of black voters, targeting them with campaign commercials and widespread leaflet distribution, and reportedly financing get-out-the-vote operations by black ministers. Mississippi has the highest proportion of African Americans of any state, some 36 percent of the population.

The state Republican Party, formed by segregationists who broke with the Democrats after the national Democratic Party abandoned its defense of Jim Crow, has based its dominance of Mississippi politics over the last four decades on a tacit, and sometimes explicit, racial appeal. Usually, its support among black voters is in the range of 2-3 percent.

But on Tuesday, the bulk of the increased vote for Cochran came from black voters, particularly in the state capital, Jackson, and in the rural Delta region, which is majority black. In Hinds County (Jackson),

which is two-thirds African American, turnout in the runoff shot up 43 percent compared to the June 3 primary, and those who voted backed Cochran by 72 percent. His 11,000-vote margin there was considerably more than his statewide victory margin.

McDaniel denounced the unexpected turnout of black voters at the polls, refusing to concede defeat and claiming that he would never accept a “Republican primary decided by liberal Democrats.” His campaign threatened lawsuits under a provision in Mississippi law that bars voters from participating in one party’s primary if they have no intention of voting for the party’s candidate in the general election. The law does not define intent and has been deemed unenforceable in the past.

Several prominent black Democratic politicians called for a vote for Cochran in the runoff to defeat his Tea Party challenger, including Representative Bennie Fowler, the lone Democrat in Mississippi’s congressional delegation.

The role of the Democrats only underscores the dead end of the politics of the “lesser evil.” For decades, Democratic politicians have told workers to vote for them because the Republicans were worse. In Tuesday’s contest, they told workers to vote for a right-wing Republican because his opponent was even more reactionary. Presumably, if McDaniel had won election to the Senate and faced a subsequent challenge by a Klansman, the same logic would apply.

The other significant contest Tuesday, the Democratic primary in New York’s 24th congressional district, demonstrated the reactionary character of identity politics. The longtime Democratic congressman from Harlem, Charles Rangel, won a narrow victory over State Senator Adriano Espaillat, a rematch of their equally close contest two years ago.

Even by the dismal standards of official US politics, there were no significant political differences between Rangel and Espaillat. The driving force of the contest was the shift in the composition of the district, which includes all of Manhattan above 89th Street, from majority black to majority Hispanic, predominately immigrants and descendants of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. In one primary debate, Rangel actually asked of Espaillat, “What the heck has he done, besides saying he’s a Dominican?”

Top Democratic Party leaders lined up behind

Rangel, who has held the seat since 1970, but the *New York Times* endorsed Espaillat, citing Rangel’s censure by the House of Representatives for a variety of tax and reporting violations. Racial demagogue-turned-media millionaire Al Sharpton was very publicly neutral, in effect backing Espaillat.

In the end, Rangel won by just over 1,800 votes in a turnout of barely 50,000 people in a district with a total population more than 600,000, where more than 250,000 voted in the 2012 presidential election.



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