Democratic Senate candidates sound right-wing themes in pre-election debates

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The November 4 election will decide whether the Democratic Party or the Republican Party has a majority in the Senate and in the House of Representatives, but it will not change the basic political direction of the United States, since both corporate-controlled parties are committed to programs of militarism, attacks on democratic rights, and slashing spending on domestic social programs.

The fundamental agreement between the Democrats and Republicans was on display last week in a series of debates between Senate candidates in five southern states: North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas and Kentucky. The five races are closely contested, with polls showing the outcome too close to call or with small leads for one party or the other.

Given the current 55-45 edge for the Democrats in the Senate, with the Republican Party needing a net gain of six seats to take control, the results in these five southern races could well decide the outcome. (Three seats being vacated by longtime Democratic senators, in Montana, South Dakota and West Virginia, are already projected to be won by the Republicans).

The five debates reviewed here included the following:

• GEORGIA, Democrat Michelle Nunn, daughter of longtime former senator Sam Nunn, vs. Republican millionaire CEO David Perdue.

• NORTH CAROLINA, Democratic Senator Kay Hagan vs. the Republican speaker of the state legislature Thom Tillis.

• LOUISIANA, Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu vs. Republican Congressman Bill Cassidy.

• ARKANSAS, Democratic Senator Mark Pryor vs. Republican Congressman Tom Cotton.

• KENTUCKY, Democratic state secretary of state Allison Lundergan Grimes vs. Republican Senator Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, who would become Majority Leader if the Republicans take control November 4.

Videos and transcripts of the debates are available on C-Span. The transcripts have the following oddity: while giving a verbatim account of what each candidate said, they do not identify candidates themselves by name, only as "unidentified speaker." Given the similarity in content, it is frequently difficult to tell when the Democrat or the Republican is speaking. The constant references to Obama (from the Republicans), and the non-mention of Obama (from the Democrats) are the clearest indication of which party's candidate is speaking.

One of the most remarkable aspects of these debates was their sheer narrowness and parochialism. The Obama administration last month launched a major war in the Middle East, bombing targets in Syria in addition to those already under attack in Iraq. Yet in two of the five Senate debates, there was no discussion of the war: in Arkansas, foreign policy was discussed only from the standpoint of the need to keep open local military bases, while in Kentucky, the subject did not come up at all.

In Georgia and North Carolina, the Democratic candidates fervently supported US military intervention and attacked their Republican opponents from the right, for being more reluctant to back such action.

Michelle Nunn in Georgia is the daughter of a former senator who played a hawkish role in US military and foreign policy in the 1980s and 1990s. She called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) an "incredibly dangerous threat," and then went on to attack her opponent as insufficiently militaristic. "One year ago David Perdue said to do nothing about Syria, and I said we needed to intervene," she argued. "It was not the popular thing to do then, but now it is."

Senator Kay Hagan in North Carolina described herself as someone who would "fight for the military" in her role on the Armed Services Committee. She said of ISIS, "These individuals are terrorists. They have attacked Americans. Our mission should be to eradicate these terrorists."

She went on to attack her opponent Tillis, saying, "What I have seen Speaker Tillis has done is he is waffling on these issues. I have been clear. I have been decisive. I think we need to hear from Speaker Tillis as far as what he would do."

In response to criticism by Tillis of her performance on the Armed Services Committee, she placed herself in the vanguard of pro-intervention senators, saying, "Please note a year ago this past spring I actually asked about arming and training moderate Syrian rebels at the time. That was before we knew what ISIS was. I really think if we had taken that step we would not have seen the proliferation of these barbaric terrorists."

In Louisiana, Senator Landrieu embraced the Obama administration's policy in the Middle East, saying of ISIS, "We need to do everything we can to eliminate it. It's a serious threat not only against the United States but the region, which is an important region of our interests. Secondly I do support the airstrikes against ISIS and believe that all presidents should have the authority to act when they believe America is in danger. Thirdly I would support the use of force. I think I would stop short at this point for boots on the ground."

Republican Congressman Cassidy denounced the administration furiously but agreed with its policy in substance. "I support the plan because it's the only plan out there," he said. "I'm not sure it's going to be adequate." But he went on to suggest he would back the use of ground troops as part of a larger strategy.

On domestic policy, both Democrats and Republicans backed further cuts in public spending. Michelle Nunn said of the federal

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budget deficit, “We both agree this is a huge issue. We disagree in that I believe in a bipartisan effort. It has to be done in a collaboration. Cut spending, cut medical expenses.” She went on to say, “I believe the only way to craft good legislation is with Republican support.”

Asked for more specifics, she hailed the outgoing Republican senator she is running to succeed, Saxby Chambliss, in his effort to draft a bipartisan spending and tax bill with Democrat Mark Warner. “We need to cut spending and reform taxes to settle the deficit,” she concluded.

Kay Hagan likewise backed reactionary bipartisan measures including the immigration legislation proposed by Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, which would have established a 17-year process for immigrants to become citizens. She also backed Republican calls for a ban on travelers from the three countries in West Africa now devastated by Ebola.

Her plan for deficit reduction centered on a massive tax cut for giant US corporations that have parked $1 trillion in offshore accounts to avoid paying US corporate income taxes. The current tax rate is 35 percent, but Hagan boasted, “My bill would allow that money to come in at eight percent. They can bring that to five if they hire American workers.” In other words, corporate America would enjoy a windfall of $300 billion, courtesy of the US taxpayer.

In the Arkansas debate, Senator Pryor, the Democratic incumbent, portrayed himself as a veteran budget-cutter. “You all know me and you know I am serious about this. People in Washington know—I watch this closely and we have to get spending under control. That is why I voted to cut spending by $4 trillion in the last three years.”

As always in a US election, the Democrats portrayed the Republicans as committed to slashing Medicare and Social Security, while the Republicans piously proclaimed their dedication to these programs—only one, Cassidy in Louisiana, declaring his support for raising the age of eligibility for Medicare from 65 to 70 years.

For the most part, the actual differences between the Democrats and Republicans boiled down to the following, in state after state: the Democrats backed an increase in the minimum wage, declared climate change to be a reality, supported gay marriage, and opposed repeal of Obamacare. The Republicans took the opposite stand on each question.

While the climate change issue reveals the grip of Christian fundamentalists (and oil companies) on the Republican Party, the differences in ideology have no real practical implications. Democratic candidate Grimes in Kentucky pledged her loyalty to the coal industry and Senator Landrieu in Louisiana did the same for the oil and gas producers.

On Obamacare, the Republicans continue to point to its most reactionary features, such as cuts in Medicare funding, even while they themselves support even deeper cuts. The Arkansas debate was held just after Arkansas-based Walmart announced it was ending health care benefits for tens of thousands of part-time workers, dumping these workers into the exchanges set up under Obamacare.

The minimum wage increase is an empty promise that even if fulfilled would not lift millions of low-paid workers out of poverty. With a Republican-controlled House, there is no possibility of such an increase passing, so Democratic Senate candidates are happy to make the promise knowing they won’t have to do anything.

This issue has been highlighted is several states by the introduction of referendum measures which will be on the ballot November 4, whose major purpose is to persuade poor and working-class voters to go to the polls despite their deep aversion to both parties.

In only one of the five debates was a Republican placed at a disadvantage on the economic issue, and that by his own doing. In the Georgia debate, David Perdue was asked about outsourcing at several corporations he had headed, particularly the textile manufacturer Pillowtex and he proceeded to boast about his record. In the aftermath of the debate, his poll numbers began to plunge.

Because the policies of the Obama administration have so clearly favored the wealthy and Wall Street, however, it was impossible for the Democratic candidates to sustain the pretense that they defended the interests of working people. This was demonstrated in the Arkansas debate, where Senator Pryor, the Democratic incumbent, denounced his Republican opponent Cotton for his ties to billionaires like the Koch brothers.

At one point Pryor was asked how he defined middle class, and the senator, himself the son of former senator David Pryor, and thus an epitome of inherited privilege, said that $200,000 a year was a middle-class income. This is a state which ranks 49th out of the 50 states in nearly every socioeconomic indicator, with a median income of barely $40,000.

A lengthy wrangle over the economy then ensued, with Cotton concluding, “Over the last six years of the economy, if you make a living off of assets or investments like stocks or bonds, the top five percent of all income earners, you are doing OK. If you make a living by working, if labor is your means of putting food on your table, your incomes are down… That is because Mark Pryor is a rubberstamp for Barack Obama’s policies.”

Cotton is perhaps the most extreme right-winger running as a major-party Senate candidate this year, calling for the gutting of food stamps and other forms of government support to the poor. That this diehard reactionary can posture as a defender of those who “make a living by working” only testifies to the utter bankruptcy of the Democratic Party, and of the two-party system as a whole.

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