

# Narrow Republican victory in Kansas special election

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A special congressional election in Kansas resulted in victory for Republican Ron Estes April 12. However, Democratic Party leaders were citing the narrow margin of victory in a strongly Republican district as a signal that President Trump's deep unpopularity was helping them make political gains, despite their refusal to offer any serious challenge to Trump except from the right, in advocating a more confrontational policy towards Russia.

The Fourth Congressional District includes the city of Wichita and its suburbs, as well as a swathe of rural counties to its south and west. It has been held by Republican candidates for the past 23 years, during which Wichita has become the focal point for anti-abortion demonstrations and the assassination of abortion doctor George Tiller in 2009. The biggest local corporation, Koch Industries, owned by billionaires David and Charles Koch, has bankrolled right-wing candidates and think tanks and virtually created the ultra-right Tea Party movement.

Estes, the Kansas state treasurer, ran against first-time candidate James Thompson in an election to replace Congressman Mike Pompeo, who vacated his seat after Trump tapped him to direct the CIA. Estes defeated Thompson by only 8 points after the national Republican Party mounted a last-minute campaign. Both Trump and Pence recorded robocalls on behalf of Estes. Trump called Estes a "wonderful guy" in a tweet on election day.

After Pompeo resigned his seat to run the CIA, neither capitalist party assigned much importance to the contest to fill the vacancy in a district that Trump carried by a margin of 27 percent, and Pompeo won by an even wider margin.

But Estes and the Republicans found themselves tainted not only by mass opposition to the Trump

administration, but by Republican Governor Sam Brownback's unpopularity. On March 30, Brownback vetoed a bill that would have expanded Medicaid eligibility for low-income residents. The bill had enjoyed bipartisan support by state lawmakers and it passed through the Kansas Senate and the House, both of which are controlled by Republicans.

Brownback, who has treated the state government as a testing ground for ultra-right policies, had already alienated working people by slashing taxes repeatedly for business and the wealthy, while cutting \$180 million from the state budget, plundering highway construction funds and raising sales taxes twice to make up for budget shortfalls.

As Thompson and Estes battled it out in the final days before the special election, the national Democratic Party did little to counter the late effort of Republican leaders, who poured money into the congressional campaign. While much closer than previous elections, the special election showed no real surge in voter participation, with only 120,000 going to the polls, compared to 275,000 on Election Day in 2016.

In the wake of his defeat, Thompson bitterly told supporters; "I probably shouldn't say this, but Mr. Estes did not beat us. It took a president of the United States, a vice president, the speaker of the House, a senator coming into our state, and a bunch of lies to try and drum up a vote."

Democratic Party officials were quick to suggest that the 23-point swing in Kansas, if repeated in other special elections this year, could produce a series of defeats for the Republicans. There are three more special elections to fill vacancies created by departing Republican congressmen: Tom Price of Georgia, now Secretary of Health and Human Services; Ryan Zinke of Montana, now Secretary of the Interior; and Mick

Mulvaney of South Carolina, now director of the Office of Management and Budget.

The next special election where the Democrats hope to take advantage of popular dissatisfaction with Trump and the Republican majority in Congress is the Sixth Congressional District of Georgia, in the northern Atlanta suburbs, on April 18, when Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff will face off against more than a dozen Republicans in an open primary to fill the Price vacancy. If no candidate wins an outright majority, there will be a runoff of May.

The district has long been held by Republican candidates, going back to Newt Gingrich, who held the seat for 20 years. But like many upscale suburban areas, there was a significant shift towards the Democrats and Hillary Clinton in 2016, and Trump carried the district by only 1.5 percent, while Price won by 24 percent.



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