Special election for House seat in Georgia heads to June runoff

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The race to fill the House seat vacated by Republican Tom Price, now head of the Department of Health and Human Services, is heading to a June 20 runoff after the leading candidate, Democrat Jon Ossoff, a former congressional staffer, fell short of a simple majority of the vote Tuesday. Ossoff will face the runner-up, Republican Karen Handel, a former Georgia secretary of state.

Tuesday's election was close, with Ossoff winning 48.1 percent of the vote, while the top four Republicans won 48.2 percent, with Handel finishing first among the four, with 19.8 percent. The ballot was split among a large field of candidates, including 11 Republicans, 5 Democrats and 2 Independents.

The result left both capitalist parties claiming victory—the Democrats for coming so close to the 50 percent mark that a victory in the runoff is quite possible, the Republicans for forcing a runoff at all, under conditions where the widespread unpopularity of the Trump administration made an outright Democratic victory a real possibility.

As is typical in special elections, voter turnout was down significantly from the general election six months ago. Only about 194,000 voted on Tuesday compared to the 326,000 who went to the polls in November 2016. By the latest tally, Ossoff received 92,390 votes while the Democrat who lost to Price last November received 124,917.

The race is widely seen as a referendum on the policies of the Trump administration and a test of the electoral strategies of both the Democrats and Republicans.

Trump personally intervened in the race multiple times on Twitter including with one tweet that read, "Democrat Jon Ossoff would be a disaster in Congress. VERY weak on crime and illegal immigration, bad for jobs and wants higher taxes. Say NO." He tweeted again on Wednesday in support of Handel, framing the runoff as "Hollywood vs. Georgia," a reference to the substantial amount of out-of-state funding that has been poured into Ossoff's campaign.

Ossoff and the various Republican candidates raised a staggering $14.3 million in the first round of campaigning, with even more expected in the two-month campaign for the June 20 runoff. Ossoff alone raised $8.3 million in the first quarter of 2017, far outpacing pre-election quarterly fundraising totals for 2016 House races. Candidates in competitive districts raised half a million dollars on average in the third quarter of 2016.

The former aide to Congressman John Lewis, now a documentary filmmaker, has received substantial support from national Democratic Party fundraisers, with 95 percent of his campaign's money coming from outside Georgia. Among the most prominent donors is David Nir, the political director of DailyKos, who raised 1 million dollars for the campaign.

Handel on the other hand is backed by the billionaire Ricketts family, based in Illinois, and received $1.3 million in support from their Ending Spending political advocacy group. Pro-Republican groups have already spent approximately $5 million on attack ads against Ossoff.

Covering the affluent northern suburbs of Atlanta, the Sixth District has been a Republican stronghold since Newt Gingrich first won the seat in 1978. Mitt Romney carried the district by 24 points in 2012, but there was sizeable shift toward the Democrats in the 2016 presidential campaign, when Trump won the district only narrowly by 1 percent.

According to the US Census Bureau, median household income in the district is $80,000, nearly

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$30,000 above the national average, and almost 60 percent of residents have a college degree. Democrats targeted the district because of these social characteristics, appealing to affluent suburban voters while ignoring working-class whites, who either stayed home or voted for Trump.

Ossoff campaigned as a “moderate”—i.e., right-wing—Democrat, promising that he would work with the Republican majority in Congress. “The only test to policy that I’ll supply is, is it in the interest of this community?” Ossoff said at a campaign house party earlier this month. “If it is, I’ll support it. If it’s not, I won’t. I’ll work with anyone who wants to help us here and help the country, and I’ll stand up to anyone who doesn’t, regardless of party.”

Accordingly, he also refused to criticize the cruise missile strikes ordered by Trump on the Assad government. “Congress has an important role to play in ensuring the conduct of U.S. foreign policy is the interest of the American people, but so too does the commander in chief have significant discretion to act where appropriate,” Ossoff replied when asked about the attack.

There is little doubt that the Democrat will move even further to the right in the course of the runoff campaign, in an effort to win over some of the supporters of the Republican candidates defeated in the April 18 primary. The outcome is likely to be determined, however, not by such petty maneuvers, but by the popular reaction to further actions by the Trump administration over the next two months.

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