

Democrats lose special House elections in Georgia, South Carolina

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22 June 2017

Democratic challengers lost in special elections June 20 for seats in the House of Representatives from Georgia and South Carolina, falling short in each case by about 3-4 percent of the vote.

The loss in Georgia was especially devastating, as the Democrats poured unprecedented sums into the contest for the Sixth Congressional District in the northern suburbs of Atlanta. Democratic leaders touted the district as the kind of wealthy suburban area where they hoped to make gains in the 2018 congressional elections.

Instead, after the most expensive congressional election in US history, with a total of \$60 million raised—twice the previous record, set in Florida in 2012—Democrat Jon Ossoff lost to Republican Karen Handel by about 10,000 votes.

Ossoff had won 48.1 percent of the vote in an all-party primary election in April, falling just short of the 50 percent required for outright victory. Forced into a head-to-head runoff with the leading Republican, Ossoff actually saw his percentage of the vote drop slightly.

In the other special election Tuesday, ultra-right Republican Ralph Norman defeated Democrat Archie Purnell by nearly the same percentage as in the Georgia race, 51.1 percent to 47.9 percent. But with the turnout far lower, Norman actually won by a much narrower margin of votes cast, 2,834 out of 87,000 for the two candidates combined.

The Georgia election filled the vacancy created by the appointment of Representative Tom Price to head the Department of Health and Human Services. The South Carolina vacancy was created by the appointment of Representative Mick Mulvaney as Trump's budget director.

The Georgia contest had far more media attention and

resources devoted to it, both in terms of campaign cash and political staff and volunteers on both sides, than the race in South Carolina. But despite raising a staggering \$23 million directly, and receiving millions more from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and other party fundraisers, Ossoff failed to increase the Democratic electorate by a single vote.

Ossoff received virtually the same total vote June 20 as the token Democrat who was on the ballot in the Sixth Congressional District on November 8, 2016, against the incumbent Republican Price: 124,893 votes for Ossoff, compared to 124,917 votes last year for the political unknown Rodney Stooksbury, a retired Lockheed Martin worker who did not even have a campaign web site.

Ossoff was the candidate most closely aligned with the political strategy of the dominant Clinton-Obama wing of the Democratic Party. Although his personal background was as an aide to liberal Democratic Representative Hank Johnson of Atlanta, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, Ossoff ran a conservative campaign, in keeping with the party establishment's commitment to retake the House by targeting wealthy suburban districts where Trump performed poorly against Hillary Clinton.

As the *New York Times* described it, Ossoff “sought to avoid being linked to [Democratic leader Nancy] Pelosi or labeled a liberal. He assured voters he would not raise taxes on the rich. And in pledging to root out wasteful spending and seek compromise, he sounded more like an heir to former Senator Sam Nunn's brand of Southern centrism than a progressive millennial. ...”

Moreover, after making an appeal to anti-Trump sentiment when he first entered the campaign, with the slogan, “Make Trump Furious!”, Ossoff hardly mentioned the US president during the final two

months of the campaign, even though Trump and the Republican National Committee were backing Handel and seeking to tie Ossoff to the national Democratic leadership.

In South Carolina, too, the Democratic campaign was of a right-wing character, with the party establishment selecting as its candidate a wealthy former tax consultant for the Goldman Sachs investment bank to contest a district filled with closed textile mills, ruined small towns and hard-pressed farmers.

The South Carolina district was the only one of the four vacancies filled by special elections this spring to have a significant minority population—it is 35 percent African-American. But Purnell, while making the rounds of black churches, made no class appeal to black or white workers, and voter turnout plunged to less than one-third the number who voted last November 8.

The result of the four special elections held this spring—in Kansas, Montana, Georgia and South Carolina—has exacerbated tensions within the Democratic Party. Supporters of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders complained that the DNC refused to devote any significant resources to back the Democratic challengers in Kansas and Montana, who were more closely aligned with his faction.

Meanwhile, virtually unlimited resources were made available to the Ossoff campaign, although the district was by far the most heavily Republican of the four districts, as well as the wealthiest.

The Republican victories in the four contests were hardly a demonstration of popular support for the Trump administration, despite efforts by Trump and Republican Party flacks to argue otherwise. According to several press reports, a major consideration in the selection of the four Republican House members for Trump's cabinet was that they all came from seats that could be defended despite an anticipated upsurge in popular hostility towards the new administration.

This calculation proved to be accurate. The average swing against the Republican Party in the four contests was 18 percent: 10 percent in Montana, 17 percent in South Carolina, 21 percent in Georgia, and 24 percent in Kansas. But the Democrats lost anyway, thanks to their refusal—or rather inability—to make any appeal to mounting social discontent.

Republicans won the four seats last November with a combined total vote of 811,513 to 518,103 for the

Democrats, a margin of 293,410 votes. They won the same four seats in the spring by a combined vote of 432,479 to 388,758, a margin of only 43,721 votes. The Republican vote fell by nearly half, but the Democratic vote also declined, under conditions of protests against the Trump administration taking place virtually every week.

There was one additional factor in the Democratic losses, admitted by one prominent office-holder, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who backed Hillary Clinton in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination last year. Speaking on MSNBC, Murphy said that the single-minded focus on investigating alleged connections between the Trump campaign and Russia had become a “distraction” to mounting effective election campaigns.

“Democrats have to be hyper-focused on an economic message that tells people that the Republican Party is all about economic growth for millionaires and billionaires and the Democratic Party is about economic growth for everybody,” he said. “The fact that we have spent so much time talking about Russia, you know, has been a distraction from what should be the clear contrast between Democrats and the Trump agenda, which is on economics.”

The Democrats dropped their usual economic demagoguery in favor of a single-minded concentration on attacking the Trump administration from the right on foreign policy, portraying Trump as a Russian stooge and demanding an ever-tougher anti-Russian stance in Syria, Ukraine and eastern Europe as a whole. This campaign has failed to win any significant support among working people, who are intensely opposed to overseas military adventures in the Middle East and elsewhere.



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