Democrats choose former CIA agent for congressional nomination

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Primary elections in five US states Tuesday chose the Democratic and Republican nominees for three US Senate seats, four governorships and 25 seats in the House of Representatives.

The results confirmed the main political trends in the two corporate-controlled parties, with both parties moving further to the right. The Republican Party is embracing candidates who echo the fascistic demagogy of the Trump White House, particularly directed against immigrants. The Democratic Party continues to select candidates drawn to an extraordinary extent from the national security apparatus—ex-CIA, military intelligence and combat commanders, as well as civilian national security officials.

More people voted in Democratic primaries than in Republican primaries, but turnout was light in all five states: Maine, Virginia, South Carolina, North Dakota and Nevada. Only Virginia is among the larger states in terms of population, ranking 12th, with 8.4 million people, about as many as the other four states combined.

The most important result in the Democratic primaries was the selection of three more candidates for Congress with military-intelligence backgrounds in competitive seats—those now held by Republicans that are considered vulnerable if there is a shift to the Democratic Party in the November election.

This brings the total to 20, about one-third of the nominees selected so far to contest competitive seats. A career in the military-intelligence apparatus is by far the largest occupational category for such nominees, more than state and local government, the legal profession or the corporate and business hierarchy.

Abigail Spanberger, who worked for nearly nine years as a CIA undercover operative, mainly in Europe—she speaks French, Spanish, German and some Italian—won the Democratic nomination in the Seventh Congressional District of Virginia, which includes the northern suburbs of Richmond and extends north through rural areas almost to the Washington, D.C., suburbs.

Spanberger defeated another candidate with a national-security background, former Marine Corps fighter pilot Daniel Ward, by a margin of 72 percent to 28 percent. The two candidates raised nearly equal sums of money, more than $750,000 each—large sums for a congressional race—but Spanberger had the most support in the party apparatus and gushing coverage in both the local and national press.

According to her campaign web site, Spanberger was an operations officer for the CIA. The site states, "She traveled and lived abroad collecting intelligence, managing assets, and overseeing high-profile programs in service to the United States." She applied to join the CIA in 2002, began work in 2006 after a protracted vetting process, and left the agency in 2014 to return to the Richmond area and become involved in Democratic Party activities.

She will face incumbent Republican David Brat, an ultra-right college economics professor who first won the seat in 2014 after upsetting the House majority leader, Eric Cantor, in the Republican primary. Brat's campaigns have largely focused on demonizing immigrants and demanding more severe repressive measures, including Trump's border wall.

The people of the Seventh Congressional District will thus have a choice, in the candidates of the major establishment parties, between an ultra-rightist who specializes in anti-immigrant demagogy and a former operative for the most reactionary and murderous organization on the planet, responsible for torture, widespread violations of democratic rights and the deaths of millions of people.

In the Second District of Virginia, which includes Norfolk and its huge Navy complex, Elaine Luria, a former Navy commander, won the Democratic

nomination to face incumbent Republican Scott Taylor. Luria, a first-time candidate after ending a career that included commanding nuclear-powered warships, had the backing of the party establishment and a huge financial edge against one Democratic rival.

Two other military-intelligence candidates in Virginia lost their bids for the Democratic nomination in the Tenth Congressional District, to challenge incumbent Republican Barbara Comstock. Alison Friedman, an official in the Obama State Department, was aided by her personal wealth (she is an heir to the Levi Strauss fortune and gave $1 million to her own campaign) but finished second. Daniel Helmer, a combat veteran from Iraq and Afghanistan with significant backing from former military brass, finished fourth. The race was won by a local Democratic officeholder, State Senator Jennifer Wexton.

Another ex-military candidate was leading in the race for the Democratic nomination in the Second District of Maine, which includes the northern two-thirds of the state. Jared Golden enlisted in the Marines and did tours of duty in Afghanistan in 2004 and Iraq in 2005-2006. He later returned to Afghanistan as a civilian (nominally a schoolteacher) before moving to the staff of Senator Susan Collins of Maine, a Republican.

Golden began his own political career as a Democratic candidate in 2014, winning a seat in the state legislature. In the congressional primary, he was leading his main challenger, Lucas St. Clair, heir to the Burt's Bees cosmetics fortune, by about nine percentage points. This election is being held under a new electoral system in which the lowest-ranking candidates will be eliminated and their votes redistributed based on second preferences of their supporters.

The Democrats selected another military-intelligence candidate for governor of South Carolina in an uphill race for a seat held by the Republicans for the past 15 years. James Smith is a member of the South Carolina state legislature, but his background is in the military, including eight years as a judge advocate general, or military prosecutor. After 9/11, he resigned his commission and reenlisted and went through basic training to become a combat infantryman. This led to a one-year tour of duty in Afghanistan, which, his web site boasts, "makes him one of a small number of public officials nationwide who have served the United States in combat. Smith's military service shaped his outlook on civic service. …"

On the Republican side, two results demonstrated the party's headlong rush to the right. State legislator Katie Arrington defeated incumbent Representative Mark Sanford in the First District of South Carolina after a campaign focused on her denunciations of Sanford's occasional criticisms of Trump's crudest and most vulgar comments. Arrington told her victory rally, "We are the party of Donald J. Trump," while Trump tweeted his enthusiastic support.

In Virginia, former Trump campaign manager Corey Stewart won the Republican nomination for US Senate, to face the heavily favored incumbent Tim Kaine, who was Hillary Clinton's running mate in 2016. Stewart called Trump the "greatest president" of the last 100 years. He narrowly defeated a state legislator, Nick Freitas, who campaigned as a "libertarian" critic of Trump from an even more right-wing perspective, calling for even greater cuts in public spending for social services and even bigger tax cuts for the wealthy.

Only one electoral result in Tuesday's voting actually determined the winner of an office, rather than selecting a nominee of one of the two big business parties. That was a special election in the 1st State Senate district of Wisconsin, in the area around Green Bay. The Republican incumbent stepped down to take an appointed position in state government and the Democratic Party won the seat, although Trump carried the district by 17 points in 2016.

This was the 25th Republican-held seat in a state legislature captured by the Democrats since Trump took office, compared to only five Democratic seats captured by Republicans. This is only a pale indication of the mounting hostility to the Trump administration among working people, which can find no politically progressive expression within the framework of the corporate-controlled two-party system.

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