

After Florida primary, Republican candidate makes racist attack

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The last major day of primary elections in the US was followed only hours later by a racist provocation by the Republican candidate for governor of Florida, an incident that demonstrates how reactionary the fall general election campaign will become.

Andrew Gillum won an upset victory Tuesday in the contest for the Democratic nomination for governor. The African-American mayor of Tallahassee, the Florida state capital, won a four-way contest with 34.3 percent of the vote. Gillum had the backing of Senator Bernie Sanders, as well as last-minute financial support from billionaires Tom Steyer and George Soros.

The Republican candidate for governor will be Representative Ron DeSantis, an Iraq War veteran who had the fervent backing of President Trump. Fox News gave DeSantis the equivalent of nearly \$10 million in free television time, with a total of 121 appearances since his endorsement by Trump. Their combined intervention propelled the obscure three-term congressman to a 56-37 percent victory over State Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam, a former congressman who was the choice of the party establishment, backed by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and the best funded of the Republican candidates.

DeSantis told Fox Wednesday morning that he was running to continue the supposed progress in Florida under the administration of the term-limited Republican Governor Rick Scott, who is running for the US Senate seat now held by Democrat Bill Nelson. He then gave a scarcely disguised racist appeal.

“We’ve got to work hard to make sure that we continue Florida going in a good direction and to build off the success we’ve had on Gov. Scott,” DeSantis said. “The last thing we need to do is to monkey this up by trying to embrace a socialist agenda with huge tax increases and bankrupting the state.”

The words “monkey this up,” in a southern state, on the first day of a general election contest against an African-American opponent, were an obvious appeal to racial prejudice. While the Florida Democratic Party protested the “racist dog whistles,” a spokesman for DeSantis blandly denied the obvious racial overtones.

“Ron DeSantis was obviously talking about Florida not

making the wrong decision to embrace the socialist policies that Andrew Gillum espouses,” spokesman Stephen Lawson said. “To characterize it as anything else is absurd.”

But Fox News was compelled to issue a follow-up segment, in which its anchorwoman, Sandra Smith, said, “We do not condone this language and wanted to make our viewers aware that he has since clarified his statement.” The right-wing network also offered Gillum time on a later news program.

Trump also engaged in twitter attacks on Gillum, who has called for his impeachment. He denounced Gillum as a “failed Socialist mayor” and reiterated his enthusiasm for DeSantis after his “monkey” comment had been widely publicized. These remarks followed by two days his comments to representatives of right-wing evangelical protestant groups, raising the nonexistent danger of “violence” from the left in order to justify the repression of left-wing opposition.

Gillum is, of course, not a socialist, but a conventional Democrat seeking to give a left-wing gloss to a right-wing party. He was not, until the primary campaign, even identified with the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party. He backed Clinton in the 2016 presidential primary in Florida, which she won easily. But facing the candidate of the party establishment, former congresswoman Gwen Graham, daughter of former governor and senator Bob Graham, and two self-funding multimillionaires, the Tallahassee mayor adopted a “left” stance.

Gillum came out for “Medicare for all,” abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), legalizing marijuana, a \$15 minimum wage, and the impeachment of Trump. He also emphasized his working-class origins, as the son of a construction worker and a school bus driver, born in the Miami ghetto, and the first person in his family to graduate from high school or college.

There was a definite political response to this appeal among working people, as Gillum swept the major urban centers, including the three counties of southeast Florida—Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach—as well as Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Tallahassee, Pensacola and Gainesville. Sanders campaigned with him earlier this month in Orlando and Tampa-St. Petersburg.

Voter turnout set a record of 3.1 million, nearly double that in

2014, the last previous midterm, but the increase among Democratic voters was matched among Republican voters, who actually outnumbered Democrats slightly among those going to the polls Tuesday.

Gillum spent the least of the major candidates for the Democratic nomination, \$4 million, compared to \$12 million for Graham, \$30 million for former Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine, and more than \$40 million for real estate billionaire Jeff Greene. Graham finished second with 31.3 percent of the vote, followed by Levine with 20.3 percent and Greene with 10.1 percent.

In a recent interview, Gillum preached party unity, declaring, “We’re showing that we can bring together the Bernie Sanders wing of the party and the Hillary Clinton wing of the party.” At the same time, he renewed his anti-Trump messaging, telling supporters at a victory rally that his campaign was against “the dark days that we’ve been under, coming out of Washington...the derision and the division that has been coming out of our White House.”

The *New York Times* immediately pointed to the gubernatorial elections in Florida and Georgia as tests of racial politics. In each state, an African-American Democrat is opposing a Trump-style Republican: Stacy Abrams vs. Brian Kemp in Georgia, and now Gillum vs. DeSantis in Florida.

The Florida gubernatorial election was not the only victory for Sanders and his supporters on August 28, the last major primary day, on which the two big business parties selected nominees for governor in Florida, Oklahoma and Arizona, for US senator in Florida and Arizona, and for 40 seats in the House of Representatives in the three states combined.

A left-talking candidate, David Garcia, won the Democratic nomination for governor of Arizona and is expected to be competitive with the Republican incumbent Douglas Ducey in November. Garcia has also called for abolishing ICE—actually renaming or rebranding the agency, not shutting it down—and opposed the Trump policy of building a solid wall all along the state’s border with Mexico.

In congressional races, however, insurgent candidates were defeated either by Democratic incumbents or by candidates hand-picked by the party establishment. Representative Stephanie Murphy easily defeated Chardo Richardson, who had been endorsed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to win re-nomination to her seat in the Seventh District of Florida.

The 77-year-old former secretary of health and human services under Bill Clinton, Donna Shalala, won the nomination for an open seat, Florida’s 27th Congressional District, in Miami, defeating four rivals. Shalala was president of the University of Miami for more than a decade, then headed the Clinton Foundation from 2015 to 2017.

In four Florida congressional districts, candidates with a military-intelligence or State Department background won the Democratic nominations, continuing one of the main trends of the midterm election campaign, the influx of military-

intelligence candidates into the Democratic Party.

In the Second District, in the Florida panhandle, challenging incumbent Neil Dunn, career naval intelligence officer **Robert Rackleff** won the Democratic nomination. Rackleff began a political career after retiring from the military and was a county commissioner in Leon County (Tallahassee) and a speechwriter for several Obama cabinet members.

In the Sixth District, vacated by DeSantis in his run for governor, the Democratic candidate will be **Nancy Soderberg**, a former State Department official and member of the National Security Council in the Clinton administration, as well as alternate US ambassador to the United Nations. She then headed the International Crisis Group, an NGO linked to US foreign policy initiatives.

In the 12th District, in the suburbs of Tampa-St. Petersburg, **Christopher Hunter** won the Democratic nomination to face incumbent Republican Gus Bilirakis. Hunter joined the FBI after 9/11 as a special agent, focused on counterintelligence and counterterrorism, then became a federal prosecutor.

In the 18th District, on Florida’s Atlantic Coast, north of Palm Beach, **Lauren Baer** won the Democratic nomination, defeating Pam Keith. Both candidates had national security backgrounds. Baer served as a legal adviser to Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, as well as to Obama’s UN Ambassador Samantha Power. Keith was a judge-advocate general in the Navy before becoming a top corporate counsel for Florida Power & Light.

The Democratic Party establishment prevailed in all the contests in Arizona, with Representative Kyrsten Sinema facing only token opposition in winning the US Senate nomination. She will face Representative Martha McSally, who defeated two ultra-right opponents, former state senator Kelli Ward and former sheriff Joe Arpaio, to win the Republican nomination.

Sinema, a former Green Party member, has moved sharply to the right as a member of Congress, and invoked the memory of Senator John McCain in her campaign, declaring, “It’s up to all of us to follow his lead of always putting country over party,” in a statement issued after the death of the Republican arch-militarist.

Former Representative Ann Kirkpatrick won the Democratic nomination in the Second Congressional District to succeed McSally, defeating several rivals, including one backed by Sanders and his Our Revolution group.



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