

Trump campaigns for Mississippi Senate candidate Hyde-Smith as Democratic challenger shifts to the right

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27 November 2018

President Trump traveled to Mississippi Monday in a last-minute effort to save a long-held Republican seat in the US Senate. The runoff election between Republican Cindy Hyde-Smith and Democrat Mike Espy takes place today. The two finished one-two in the November 6 election, but the runoff was required since neither received 50 percent of the vote.

Trump held rallies in Tupelo and Biloxi. He spent far more time than usual pleading for votes for Hyde-Smith, in contrast to his rallies before the November 6 vote, when he generally focused his praise on himself and sometimes ignored the candidates he was supposedly promoting.

The two rallies were hastily scheduled after state Republicans warned that Hyde-Smith was in danger of losing, and appeared both badly organized and poorly attended. It was particularly notable that Trump's effort to center the rallies on the question of immigration and trade protectionism did not arouse much enthusiasm, even among his own loyalists.

At times, Trump appeared to be merely going through the motions, denouncing the Democrats as the party of "radical socialism and open borders," although the White House is now engaged in detailed talks with congressional Democratic leaders on a federal budget that gives the lion's share to the military, and billions in additional funding for "border security."

The US president appeared with Hyde-Smith, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, who appointed her to the Senate seat, and Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

Hyde-Smith was challenged by an ultra-right Republican, State Senator Chris McDaniel, and by Espy, a former Democratic congressman and cabinet

official in the Clinton administration. Hyde-Smith won 41 percent of the vote November 6, Espy 40 percent, and McDaniel 17 percent, eliminating McDaniel for the runoff. McDaniel's supporters were expected either to vote for Hyde-Smith or sit out the election, but not vote for Espy, an African-American Democrat.

Given the uncertainty about voter turnout, and Hyde-Smith's visible deficiencies as a candidate and public speaker, Republican state and national officials have openly expressed concern that the runoff could produce an upset victory for the Democrat, like that won by Doug Jones in Alabama a year ago, when he narrowly defeated the ultra-right Republican nominee Roy Moore.

Moore's political standing was undermined by a series of media reports alleging predatory conduct against teenage girls more than 30 years ago, when he was a local prosecutor in his late 30s. Hyde-Smith has suffered a similar political slide over the past two weeks based on statements and conduct linking her to Mississippi's long history of brutal racial oppression.

Several of her comments were made just before the November 6 vote but not widely publicized until afterwards. This included a declaration that she was so loyal to one of her prominent supporters that "If he invited me to a public hanging, I'd be on the front row." This was widely understood as a casual reference to Mississippi's long and gruesome history of lynching, which took the lives of hundreds of black men in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.

There was a backlash when this statement became widely publicized, and numerous big corporations that had sent campaign contributions to Hyde-Smith asked for their money back, including Google, Walmart,

AT&T, Union Pacific, Pfizer and Boston Scientific.

At a campaign event at Mississippi State University November 3, Hyde-Smith expressed support for efforts to suppress voter turnout on other campuses—i.e., the historically black colleges and universities in the state, outside the two main public colleges, MSU and the University of Mississippi. “There’s a lot of liberal folks in those other schools that maybe we don’t want to vote,” she said. “Maybe we just want to make it a little more difficult.”

Hyde-Smith refused to apologize for either statement, declaring that she had been joking on both occasions, but then declined all interview requests or further comment on the subject, until she was forced to address it in her lone debate with Espy. Then she issued an apology to “anyone who was offended,” without indicating that there was actually anything to cause offense.

There were also reports in the local Mississippi newspapers that Hyde-Smith had attended a “segregation academy” as a high school student, one of many such institutions established after court-ordered school integration finally came to the state in 1969. Even more damaging was the report that Hyde-Smith had sent her own daughter to a similar “whites-only” institution decades later.

The Democratic candidate Espy has reacted to the unexpected possibility of actual election to office by shifting even further to the right, in an effort to reassure the Mississippi business elite that he will faithfully serve their interests if he wins the runoff.

Espy has his own skeletons in the closet. He resigned from the Clinton cabinet over corruption charges, although he was eventually acquitted on all counts. He then went on to a lucrative lobbying career, representing, among others, corrupt and right-wing African rulers like Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivory Coast, overthrown in 2011.

At the debate with Hyde-Smith, Espy embraced the slogan “Mississippi first,” a transparent tribute to Trump, declaring, “Mississippi first means I value Mississippi over everything else — over party, over persons, over everybody. I am an independent person and I will be an independent senator,” he said. He also called for a “strong immigration policy.”

Particularly significant was his praise for former Senator Thad Cochran, the longtime Republican

officeholder who retired early this year. In his closing statement at the debate, Espy called Cochran a “thoughtful” and “efficient” senator, adding, “I would hope to be the kind of senator that Senator Cochran is.”



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