

Mississippi runoff election ends with Republican victory

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Republican Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith defeated her Democratic challenger, Mike Espy, in a runoff election in Mississippi yesterday. With 99 percent of precincts having reported results as of Wednesday morning the incumbent had secured 54 percent of the vote. Espy conceded defeat in a late-night speech to supporters.

The runoff election was triggered when neither candidate won a 50 percent majority in the elections held on November 6.

Hyde-Smith's victory marks the final Senate election of 2018 to be decided. The balance in the US Senate now sits at 53 Republicans and 47 Democrats, with the Democrats having lost two seats this year. Smith had been appointed to her seat in April by Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, after Senator Thad Cochran resigned due to poor health. She will finish the final two years of Cochran's term before facing re-election in 2020.

The runoff election in Mississippi had drawn national attention in recent weeks due to racist remarks made by Hyde-Smith, who made a statement earlier this year that she was so close to one supporter, "If he invited me to a public hanging, I'd be in the front row," invoking that state's long history of lynching. Earlier this month, in a speech to supporters, Smith openly advocated suppressing the vote at Mississippi's historically black colleges, telling her audience, "There's a lot of liberal folks in those other schools that maybe we don't want to vote, maybe we just want to make it a little more difficult."

Hyde-Smith refused to make any substantial apology for either comment, and instead claimed her remarks had been misinterpreted, in spite of public backlash and withdrawal of support from several large corporations, including Google and Walmart. In standing firm behind her obviously racist statements, Smith was mimicking

the strategy pursued by President Trump, who is appealing to the most backward layers in society in effort to lay the basis for an ultra-right fascistic movement based on racism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, and hostility to socialism.

In the Mississippi runoff, Hyde-Smith was also very likely trying to appeal to supporters of far-right state senator Chris McDaniel, who had won 17 percent of the vote in the first election and had attacked Hyde-Smith from the right during the campaign, comparing her to Hillary Clinton. There were concerns within the Hyde-Smith campaign that supporters of McDaniel would abstain from voting in the runoff election.

In the final weeks of the campaign, Hyde-Smith's lead in the polls started to decline, causing state Republican leaders to panic. They responded with an all-out push to get Hyde-Smith elected, pouring millions of dollars into her campaign and bringing in dozens of GOP election workers to push her over the top. President Trump also assisted her campaign in its closing days, holding two rallies in that state and promoting the candidate on Twitter.

Espy, a former secretary of Agriculture in the Clinton Administration and a member of the House of Representatives from 1987 to 1993, ran as a conservative Democrat. Unwilling to offer any substantial criticisms of either Hyde-Smith or Trump, Espy presented himself to voters as someone who supports a "strong immigration policy" and who would "work with" Trump and congressional Republicans. Espy has a history of collaboration with the Republicans, having crossed party lines in 2007 to endorse Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour in his bid for re-election.

Espy has had a checkered career since leaving the Clinton administration amid a bribery scandal in 1994.

Eventually charged with 30 counts of receiving improper gifts, Espy was acquitted of all charges in 1998. He went on to work as a lobbyist, at one point representing former Ivory Coast dictator Laurent Gbagbo, who was ousted from power in 2011 and subsequently charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court.

Had he won, Espy would have been the first African American elected to the US Senate in Mississippi since Reconstruction. However, like fellow black Democrats who sought the governorships of Georgia and Florida, Andrew Gillum and Stacey Abrams, Espy sought to demonstrate his “mainstream” politics and reassure big business that he could be relied on to defend their interests.

Nonetheless, under conditions of broad popular hostility to Trump, even in a state like Mississippi, which he won easily in 2016, the runoff election drew a considerable turnout. The number voting actually increased from the November 6 general election to the November 27 runoff, a highly unusual occurrence, although the 900,000 voting fell short of the 1.15 million votes cast in the presidential election

With the Senate line-up now set at 53-47 in favor of the Republicans, the last seat to be decided in the House of Representatives appears likely to be won by the Democrats, bringing their majority in the new House to 235-200, a gain of 40 seats, the largest increase for the Democrats since the 1974 election following the Watergate scandal.

The last contest was for the 21st Congressional District in California, in the state’s largely agricultural Central Valley, near Fresno and Tulare. Democrat T.J. Cox, who had been trailing incumbent Republican David Valadao since Election Day, overtook him on the basis of mail ballots. While some votes still remain to be counted, it appears likely that Cox will maintain his lead, giving the Democrats a net gain of seven seats in California alone.



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