

Republicans win two US House special elections

Our reporter
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In special elections on Tuesday, May 12, Republicans held on to one seat in the US House of Representatives and won another previously held by the Democrats. Both elections were conducted almost entirely by mail, given lockdown conditions prevailing in both states, Wisconsin and California, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In the seventh congressional district of Wisconsin, a seat previously held by Republican Sean Duffy, who resigned last September citing family health issues, Republican Tom Tiffany, a state senator, defeated Democrat Tricia Zunker, a school board member and tribal supreme court justice of the Ho-Chunk Native American tribe.

The largely rural northwest Wisconsin district was once a Democratic stronghold, held by Representative David Obey for 42 years, but Duffy won the seat easily after Obey retired, and held it for nine years. Barack Obama carried the district by eight percentage points in 2008, lost it narrowly in 2012, and Trump won it by 20 percent in 2016. Turnout was just over 191,000, compared to 317,000 votes cast in 2018, when Duffy won reelection easily. Tiffany received 109,592 votes to Zunker's 81,928, with some ballots still uncounted.

In the California race, former Navy fighter pilot Mike Garcia, the Republican, had a lead of 12 percentage points over state assemblywoman Christy Smith, with about 82 percent of the vote counted, when the Democrat issued a concession statement. Garcia had 82,321 votes to 64,671 for Smith.

The 25th Congressional District includes the northernmost part of Los Angeles County and parts of Ventura County, suburban areas whose residents frequently commute long distances. It is a majority-minority district, with a large Latino population, and the Republican Party heavily promoted Garcia's

identity as the son of an immigrant from Mexico who went to the US Naval Academy, later flew fighter jets in Iraq, and was now an executive at Raytheon, the huge defense contractor.

The *Washington Post* noted that in backing Garcia, "Republicans have turned to the Democratic playbook from 2018 in a special election for a House seat outside Los Angeles," because they highlighted Garcia's military background in the same way that the Democrats backed a group of ex-military and ex-CIA candidates in 2018.

Another such military Republican hopeful this year is Wesley Hunt, an African American who graduated from West Point and piloted Apache helicopters for the Army, who is now the Republican nominee in the Seventh District of Texas, against Representative Lizzie Fletcher, a Democrat elected in the 2018 wave.

Smith and Garcia finished first and second in the all-party primary election held March 3, in a contest to fill out the final months of the term of Representative Katie Hill, a Democrat who resigned last year over a sex scandal. The two are also on the ballot for the November 3 election, which will choose a representative for the full two-year term beginning in January 2021.

Hill defeated incumbent Republican Steve Knight, one of seven Republican seats in California captured by the Democrats in their 2018 congressional sweep that gave them control of the House of Representatives.

The voter turnout in the special election was only slightly above that in the March 3 primary, when there were 160,000 votes cast, divided almost evenly between candidates of the two capitalist parties, under the jungle (all-party) format that is in effect in California. Garcia finished ahead of Knight, the former incumbent, for second place, and then won the seat in

the runoff.

The result of the special election could be reversed within six months, at the November 3 general election, when the same two candidates face off and more voters are expected to participate, in a district where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by 28,000. This possibility was suggested by the demographics of the vote: 49 percent of voters over 65 had returned ballots, compared to only 15 percent of voters under 35. Latino voters participated at only half the rate of white voters.

But the result is nonetheless the first clear Republican Party victory of the current election year, and one which Trump celebrated in a tweet even before the results were made official by Smith's concession statement. Garcia is the first Republican candidate to capture a Democratic-held congressional seat in California since 1998. Since then, the Republican contingent in the California delegation had fallen to only seven out of fifty-three seats.

In the last days of the campaign, Trump intervened repeatedly, calling into question the legitimacy of the vote since it was going to be conducted primarily by mail ballot, in what appears to be a dress rehearsal for claims of fraud that he will raise during the fall presidential campaign.

Despite focusing on the supposed unreliability of mail ballots, Trump expressed additional outrage when the state of California agreed to add a polling station in the city of Lancaster, bringing to 13 the number of places where voters could cast ballots in the congressional district (as opposed to 1,000 in a normal non-coronavirus election). Despite Trump's tweet that "They are trying to steal another election. It's all rigged out there. These votes must not count. SCAM!," the additional polling place was actually requested by the Republican mayor of Lancaster.



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