

Tuesday primaries show rising popular discontent with Democratic Party establishment

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25 June 2020

Statewide primary elections held Tuesday in New York, Kentucky and Virginia saw greatly increased voter turnout despite the coronavirus threat, as voters chose to vote early or cast mail-in ballots. Voting also took place in several districts in Mississippi and North Carolina.

Most of the votes were cast in Democratic Party primaries, where there were multiple contests between candidates backed by the party establishment and those supported by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

In one of the most widely publicized contests, for the Kentucky US Senate nomination against Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, retired fighter pilot Amy McGrath, the choice of the party establishment, had a slight lead over State Representative Charles Booker. An African-American, Booker sought to appeal to widespread popular anger over the police murder of Breonna Taylor, a black emergency medical technician killed by Louisville cops in a no-knock raid in March.

While McGrath campaigned on her military record and had a huge financial advantage, as well as name recognition from her narrow loss in the race for a congressional seat in 2018, Booker had the backing of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, and highlighted his own participation in protest marches against the police murders of Taylor and George Floyd in Minneapolis, which McGrath had avoided.

The result of that race will not be known until June 30, the deadline for counting all mail-in ballots. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of Kentucky voters cast mail ballots, which had to be postmarked by the June 23 primary date but could be delivered by the weekend.

The actual breakdown, according to the secretary of state—a Republican—was 570,000 absentee ballots, 100,000 early votes, and 156,000 votes cast at polling places on election day. Statewide, there were fewer than 200 polling places open on Tuesday, compared to the 3,700 locations used in previous primary and general elections.

The state's two largest cities, Louisville and Lexington, opened only one polling station each, inside large arenas, with widely separated voting machines and lines laid out so that voters could observe social distancing. This arrangement apparently worked until near the closing time, when parking lots filled and there was a rush to get inside before the doors shut.

The other high-profile contest ended in the apparent defeat of the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Eliot Engel of New York. He trailed his main opponent, former middle school principal Jamaal Bowman, by a margin of 61 to 36 percent in the primary to select the Democratic nominee in the 16th Congressional District of New York. Engel has held the seat that includes the northern part of the Bronx and portions of southern Westchester County adjacent to New York City, for 32 years.

The only significant differences between the two were age and race—Bowman is 44 and black, while Engel is 73 and white. While Bowman criticized Engel for voting to authorize the Iraq War in 2002, he made no broader critique of the congressman's right-wing, pro-imperialist and intransigently pro-Zionist record in leading the House Democrats on foreign policy.

Bowman's apparent victory was widely compared in the media to that won by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in 2018 over Representative Joseph Crowley, another member of the House Democratic leadership (he was then chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, the fourth-ranking position).

There were significant differences in the two races, however. The challenge by Ocasio-Cortez to Crowley was largely unpublicized and poorly financed, and her victory came in a low turnout election with her margin dependent on support from upper-middle-class liberals and the Democratic Socialists of America. Ocasio-Cortez won by 4,000 votes out of fewer than 30,000 cast.

Bowman ran a much more explicitly race-based campaign, seeking to mobilize African American and Latino voters in

the majority-minority district, and his campaign raked in millions of dollars in online cash from appeals by Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. Voter turnout Tuesday was far higher, with over 44,000 votes cast at the polls and tens of thousands of absentee ballots still remaining to tabulate.

In a speech Tuesday night, Bowman presented his campaign as an expression of the popular protests against police violence which erupted after the killing of Floyd, which he presented largely in racial terms. “You know what Donald Trump is more afraid of than anything else?” Bowman asked rhetorically. “A black man with power.”

In her own contest Tuesday, Ocasio-Cortez won renomination easily with 73 percent of the vote against a well-financed right-wing challenger. At the other end of the state, Republican state senator Chris Jacobs won a special election to fill the congressional vacancy created when Representative Chris Collins resigned after being indicted for stock market fraud.

In three other New York congressional districts, the outcome of Democratic primaries remained uncertain. Another member of the House Democratic leadership, Carolyn Maloney, chair of the House Government Oversight Committee, clung to a narrow 600-vote lead over challenger Surej Patel, with thousands of mail-in votes still uncounted, in the wealthy district covering the east side of Manhattan.

Two seats had open contests because of the retirement of Representative Jose Serrano in the Bronx and Representative Nita Lowy in the lower Hudson Valley. In the Hudson Valley district, Mondaire Jones, a former Obama administration official backed by Bernie Sanders had a large lead, with 44 percent of the vote against a half dozen rivals. In the Bronx, City Councilman Ritchie Torres had a smaller lead in a similarly fractured field. Both candidates had the backing of the *New York Times*, which hailed the prospect of black, gay candidates winning the two seats.

It is noteworthy that the *Times*, which speaks for the Democratic Party wing of Wall Street, also endorsed Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, demonstrating, not for the first time, that the financial aristocracy regards the “insurgent” wing of the Democratic Party as their political instrument, just as much as their “establishment” opponents.

Another significant feature of the voting Tuesday was the failure of Democratic candidates drawn directly from the military-intelligence apparatus and running as “moderates,” who lost to candidates claiming to be more adamantly opposed to Trump.

In the 17th Congressional District of New York, the seat held by Nita Lowy, former Pentagon official Evelyn Farkas finished a poor fourth. Farkas was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia in the Obama administration. In New York’s 24th Congressional

District, in the Syracuse area, Navy veteran Francis Conole was defeated by Dana Balter, a Sanders-backed college professor who won the nomination in an upset in 2018 and then lost the general election contest narrowly to Republican Representative John Katko. Conole spent years in naval intelligence and then worked in special forces in Iraq.

In the Fifth Congressional District of Virginia, the most rural in the state, stretching from the Washington DC suburbs all the way to the North Carolina border, there were no less than three candidates boasting of a background in the Marine Corps: a retired career officer, a female former intelligence officer, and a Marine turned millionaire businessman. The three were swamped by Dr. Cameron Webb, an African American doctor and University of Virginia public health consultant who focused his campaign on the fight against the coronavirus epidemic. Webb will face Christian fundamentalist Bob Good, who ousted incumbent Representative Denver Riggleman at a party convention in a contest which focused on opposition to gay marriage.

In Republican primaries, which attracted far less attention and turnout, two congressional nomination contests were won by candidates opposed by President Trump—his first defeats in inner-party contests in this election year. In North Carolina, in the contest for a nominee to replace Mark Meadows, the Republican congressman who resigned to become White House Chief of Staff, 24-year-old Madison Cawthorn defeated Lynda Bennett, a businesswoman who had the support of both Trump and Meadows, in a low-turnout vote.

In Kentucky, Representative Thomas Massie, the lone public opponent of the CARES Act within the Republican Party and an extreme-right libertarian, won renomination easily despite Trump’s public demand for his ouster. His lone opponent was revealed to have posted openly racist and homophobic comments on social media.



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