

Mixed results for Trump-endorsed candidates in Nebraska and West Virginia primary elections

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Nebraska and West Virginia held their party primary elections this week with mixed results for Republican candidates backed by the fascistic former president Donald Trump. In Nebraska, the Trump-endorsed gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster lost the Republican nomination to Jim Pillen. Meanwhile, Trump's pick for West Virginia's Second Congressional District, Alex Mooney, defeated the fellow incumbent David McKinley.

The results in Nebraska came as a surprise to many pundits and analysts. With former governor Pete Ricketts stepping down due to term limits, a Trump endorsement was expected to help carry Herbster to victory. Instead, he was narrowly defeated by Pillen, who won 33 percent to Herbster's 30. An additional 25 percent went to self-avowed "moderate Republican" Brett Lindstrom.

Herbster, a wealthy rancher, dominated the northwest of the state where cattle ranching is the dominant industry. Lindstrom found most of his support in the city of Omaha and the surrounding suburbs, while Pillen carried the bulk of the farming communities, growing corn, soybeans, and wheat, among other crops, as well as Lincoln, the state capital.

Significantly, nearly two-thirds of Republicans who went to the polls rejected the candidate endorsed by former President Trump, undermining the notion that a Trump endorsement is a guarantee of victory in his party. Herbster's campaign also suffered from a series of sexual assault allegations from eight separate women, although the actual impact of this on voters is unclear.

Regardless of the reason voters decided to pass over Herbster, the result is still the selection of a far-right

Republican candidate. Besides the endorsement from Trump, the actual differences between Pillen and Herbster are largely insignificant. Both founded their campaigns on rabid opposition to the right to abortion, government regulation of business and right-wing frauds like the alleged teaching of "critical race theory."

Pillen, in fact, may have had the stronger right-wing credentials in the eyes of Nebraska Republicans. As a member of the University of Nebraska regents, Pillen supported the prohibition of teaching critical race theory on college campuses. He then turned this into a leading campaign policy, declaring that it was necessary to prohibit the teaching of critical race theory in order to protect freedom of speech and "important American ideals."

Pillen's campaign also included reactionary promises to support law enforcement, increase attacks on immigrants, and "fight the socialist agenda at every turn."

Media pundits have been quick to declare the defeat of Herbster as a defeat for Trump. However, given Pillen's far-right politics it can hardly be considered as such. Trump favors politicians slavishly loyal to him, and his endorsements are not so much support for a political program as they are a tool to bolster his image and attack his rivals, Republican as well as Democrat. Many of the candidates that Trump has endorsed are running against Republicans who crossed him, mainly those who did not support his coup attempt of January 6, 2021.

David McKinley is one of these. An establishment politician who has held his seat in the House of Representatives for six terms, McKinley was openly

critical of Trump and voted for the bipartisan infrastructure bill last year. Such positions earned him support from both West Virginia's Republican Governor Jim Justice and Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, but drew the ire of Trump, who endorsed Mooney the same day that Biden signed the infrastructure bill.

Mooney attacked McKinley as a "RINO" (Republican in name only), saying that he "would fight for the values of our country, not go along to get along with the Democrats." He consistently attacked McKinley for supporting Biden's infrastructure bill and for refusing to back Republican efforts to prevent the certification of the 2020 election results.

Mooney himself has repeatedly supported Trump's baseless claims that he is the rightful winner of the 2020 election and that Biden won through massive voter fraud.

This appears to have been decisive in the primary vote. West Virginia lost a congressional seat during the 2020 redistricting process, resulting in the elimination of Mooney's district, which was partitioned between McKinley's district in the northern portion of the state and the southern-based district held by Republican Carol Miller. Mooney decided to run against McKinley.

McKinley had the advantage of being a long-time congressman and the former chair of the West Virginia Republican Party, as well as having the majority of the newly restructured 2nd district in his original home territory.

Despite this, Trump's endorsement and Mooney's well-financed campaign proved decisive, earning him 54 percent of the vote and a victory in all but three of the counties in his district.

The outcome in Nebraska and West Virginia suggest that the results of a series of Republican primaries over the next month are highly uncertain. Trump-endorsed candidates will be on the ballot in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Oregon and Idaho next week. In Georgia, the ex-president has endorsed candidates to challenge Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and Governor Brian Kemp, both of whom refused to support Trump's false claims of voter fraud.

Trump has sought to inflate his "success" rate in the primaries by endorsing a string of candidates who are unopposed incumbents or otherwise heavily favored, and only a handful of candidates in key races who are

challengers. Significantly, however, as in Ohio last week, nearly all the Republican hopefuls in contested races embrace him, even if he does not support them.

As opposition to Biden grows, because of inflation, war, and the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Republican candidates seek to exploit discontent by promoting the most backward and reactionary politics. Instead of combating this, the Democrats continue to insist that the coup plotters in the Republican Party are their colleagues and that the United States must have a "strong Republican Party."

The coming weeks of primaries in larger and more populous "battleground" states will measure the strength of the Trump camp and its ability to dictate the course of the Republican Party in the November general elections.



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