Mississippi elects a black senator: A blow to racial politics

Patrick Martin
13 November 2026

The election of Democrat Scott Colom to the US Senate in Mississippi is a remarkable political development. The *World Socialist Web Site* sharply opposes his political views, those of a conventional capitalist politician. Colom is a district attorney and scion of a prominent bourgeois black family. But the election of the first African American senator from Mississippi since the Reconstruction era after the Civil War has enormous historical resonance.

Mississippi has long been the state most associated with brutal racial oppression of African Americans, particularly during the era of the civil rights struggles: the murder of Emmett Till in 1955; the violent resistance to the desegregation of the University of Mississippi in 1962 (led by Democratic Governor Ross Barnett); the assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963; the kidnap-murder of three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, in 1964.

In the state that was the home of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan, former slaves held political office during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. But that came to an end as the northern capitalist class shifted its attention from the defeated Confederacy to a more dangerous enemy: the rapidly growing and increasingly militant working class.

Democratic politicians who combined populist demagogy and white racism to split the working class and rural poor along racial lines came to dominate the state's politics. Theodore Bilbo was the major figure of the first half of the 20th century (two terms as governor, two terms in the Senate) and gained national notoriety through his racist demagogy, open antisemitism and sympathy for Nazi Germany. He advocated lynch-mob violence and introduced legislation to remove black Americans to Africa. At the same time, he backed the Roosevelt administration, and received its support in return, in the Democratic Party alliance between supposed "progressives" in the North and unabashed segregationists in the South.

The trade union bureaucracy, which gained control of the labor movement in the wake of the explosive class battles of the 1930s, made no serious effort to organize the South. This would have meant uniting black and white workers in a common struggle against Jim Crow, threatening the control of the Democratic Party, to which the unions were subordinated politically.

In Mississippi, Democratic senators John Stennis and James Eastland spent 41 years and 36 years respectively on Capitol Hill, using their seniority and influence within the Democratic Party to defend segregation and block civil rights legislation. Both were fervent supporters of McCarthyite witch-hunting and imperialist military aggression. The US Navy even christened a nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed aircraft carrier as *USS John C. Stennis* in 1995.

Under the "Southern strategy" pioneered by Richard Nixon and brought to fruition under Ronald Reagan—who began his 1980 presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, site of the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner—the Republican Party rose to power throughout the South through a combined appeal to business interests and white racism. The Republican Party has controlled the state government for more than two decades and held both Senate seats for the last 38 years.

While Mississippi has the largest percentage of African Americans of any US state, they still represent a minority of the population, just under 38 percent. Colom's victory was not due to racial issues, but to the same economic and political issues that underlay the sweeping victory of the Democrats in the midterm elections nationally, which gave them large majorities in both the House and Senate.

Exit polls in Mississippi suggest that high fuel and grocery prices (42 percent) and the dangers to democratic rights (26 percent) were the top issues. Nearly 90 percent said that high prices were either decisive or among the most crucial issues in their vote. Mississippi has long been one of the poorest US states. There was also widespread hostility to the war against Iran and Trump's ongoing efforts to establish a presidential dictatorship.

Colom won narrowly, by about 7,000 votes out of more than 950,000 cast. He ran up huge majorities in Jackson, the state capital and largest city, and in other majority-black cities and counties. But he also carried a half dozen white-majority counties and cut heavily into the Republican majorities in Gulf Coast cities like Biloxi and Gulfport.

But perhaps the most striking result was his victory in

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Lafayette County, the white-majority county which includes Oxford, site of the University of Mississippi. In 1962, racist mobs blocked the enrollment of African American James Meredith, until National Guard troops were sent in by President John F. Kennedy. Donald Trump carried Lafayette County by 22 points in 2024, but Colom won a narrow victory last week.

Such figures are an unanswerable rebuke to those who claim that racial attitudes have not changed radically in the United States over the past 60 years, and particularly in the Deep South. Colom's own campaign demonstrated that. He not only addressed a meeting in the county where Emmett Till was murdered and held an event outside the house where Medgar Evers was shot from ambush, he also appeared at the Neshoba County fair (in the county where Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner were detained by sheriff's deputies and murdered by Klansmen).

The Colom victory is only the most striking result of a wider process. The state of Georgia elected its first African American governor, Keisha Lance Bottoms, who also carried several white-majority counties. Democratic pediatrician Annie Andrews won the US Senate seat in South Carolina held for 48 years by arch-segregationist Strom Thurmond, then for 24 years by Republican Lindsey Graham, defeating Graham's sister Darline. Democrats swept statewide races in Texas and retained a congressional seat in Alabama despite a racial gerrymander.

There is a relentless effort, led by the Democratic Party and the media aligned with it, to promote the conception that race is the fundamental division in American society. The *New York Times*' 1619 Project, launched in August 2019, set out to rewrite all of American history, and with it contemporary politics, in racial terms.

The same framework was imposed on the present. Trump's victory in 2016 was explained as a revolt of white racial resentment against the first black president, most influentially in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Atlantic* essay, "The First White President." The explanation was revived after 2024. It covered up the deepening social polarization of America and the Democratic Party's open embrace of pro-corporate, anti-working-class policies, which drove millions of workers away from it.

If racism were in the nation's DNA, as the 1619 Project asserted, a white-majority county that gave Trump a 22-point margin two years ago could not have voted for a black Democrat.

There is no doubt that racism still exists and is exploited by the ruling class for its reactionary purposes, through both capitalist parties. The Republican Party is dominated by a fascist bigot who demonizes immigrants and cozies up to white supremacists.

But among the population as a whole, such tensions are easing. In the most personal and intimate sphere, racial intermarriage stood at only 3 percent in 1967, the year when the Supreme Court, in its *Loving v. Virginia* decision, struck down the last state law against "miscegenation." Among current couples, interracial marriage has risen to 11 percent. Among new marriages, it is 19 percent, six times the level of 1967.

As the WSWS has long explained, the election of black and Hispanic mayors, governors, congressmen and senators does nothing to change the nature of capitalism as a system of class exploitation. It has been used to cultivate illusions that capitalism can be reformed. At the same time, the ruling class has cultivated a layer of privileged African Americans, with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas perhaps the foulest example, to do its bidding.

Nor did the election of Barack Obama as the first black president alter the character of American imperialism. On the contrary, Obama was the first two-term president to be at war every day for eight years, extending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and instigating new conflicts in Libya and Syria, as well as targeting thousands for extermination by drone-fired missiles. Obama was initially elected on a wave of popular enthusiasm, among both black and white workers. It was eight years of reactionary, anti-working-class policies that delivered the country to Donald Trump in 2016.

The fundamental division in capitalist society is class, not race. The midterm elections expressed a developing opposition, not only to Trump, but to the entire framework of official politics, including the efforts of the ruling class to divert and block that opposition by promoting racial division.

This opposition will not be contained within electoral channels. The Democrats owe their majorities to mass hostility to Trump, the war against Iran and the cost of living, but they defend the same Wall Street interests and military-intelligence apparatus as the Republicans. Within days of the vote, they were offering bipartisanship to a defeated president. Colom himself campaigned on "working across the aisle."

As workers and young people take up the issues that drove the vote—prices, jobs, health care, war and the defense of democratic rights—they will come into direct conflict with the Democratic Party and the entire political setup it upholds. The promotion of racial politics, in which the Democrats and the *Times* have invested so heavily, is aimed at heading off precisely this development.

What is required is the independent political mobilization of the working class and its unification across all lines of race, ethnicity, nationality and gender. American workers are entering the same struggles as their class brothers and sisters in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, struggles that will raise directly and openly the question of power and the need for a revolutionary socialist alternative to capitalism.

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