Mississippi Primary Runoff Election, 2014
Republican Primary Election Runoff, Cochran (i) v. McDaniel

June 24, 2014

On June 24, 2014, the State of Mississippi defied what many experts believed to be a prime opportunity for a challenger to unseat the long-term incumbent in its Republican primary runoff election for one of the State of Mississippi seats in the United States Senate. State Senator Chris McDaniel, who won a majority of the popular vote in the June 3rd primary but fell short of the 50% vote necessary, was primed to face-off against long-term incumbent Senator Thad Cochran. As many news outlets reported, the prospects of a run-off tend to favor the challenger over the incumbent, which set the stage for a unique election night for the State of Mississippi.

One of the most notable aspects of the runoff election was the turnout for the runoff. The State had an unusually high turnout for the June 3rd primary, with over 312,000 voters casting their ballots for the three candidates (T. Carey, 3rd candidate, was not part of the runoff). For the runoff, the voter numbers reached over 375,000, or more than a 20% increase from the primary. A look at the map below shows the voter turnout for the June 24, 2014 primary runoff, with the elevation numbers representing the raw number of voters.
Voting Surge

A recent story from the Clarion Ledger stated, "Without the Mississippi Delta, Sen. Thad Cochran likely would not have won Tuesday night." While the turnout in the Mississippi Delta does reflect an increase in the number of votes, and also reflects the increased number of votes cast for Thad Cochran, it should not be overlooked that these figures reported are those of raw votes, and do not reflect age, race, gender, or any other demographic variables that would describe the voting-base that voted. What can be attributed to Senator Cochran’s victory Tuesday night is the overall push to get out the vote, as the State witnessed a surge in voters. The map below shows the increase in the vote disparity between the two candidates.

What is evident from the map is that where Senator Cochran lost votes, and significant numbers of votes (DeSoto, Jones, and Pearl River Counties), his gains in Hinds, Madison, Rankin, and Oktibbeha Counties more than offset the losses. Of note, one of the limitations of the map is the scaling of the figures. For instance, the map depicts the loss of votes in Hancock County to be somewhere between 456 and 3,782, which is a large range, while the loss figures for Hancock County are actually tallied at 611 votes shifting, which shows that the losses were not quite as large as standard maps would have one believe. The depth component of the maps helps to show the numbers differences in total votes.

Voter Turnout

Turnout in the primary and runoff elections were unprecedented for the state of Mississippi. According to a political science and public administration assistant professor at Mississippi State University Rob Mellen, the turnout for the primary was the highest in Mississippi’s history. In fact, the turnout for the runoff election exceeded the primary turnout by 20%, which is an astonishing fact. Many articles spanning the first 24 hours post-election coverage amplified this point, noting that Cochran’s win came, in part, to the increased African-American turnout. It is nothing outside of speculation to say anything about the votes except that voters turned out in larger numbers to vote. For instance, in Hinds County, more than 8,000 voters showed to vote at the runoff than the primary, with over 80% of those votes cast for Cochran. Madison County saw an increase of almost 4,000 voters, with over 65% cast for Cochran. In fact, in several counties won by McDaniel in the primary, Senator Cochran found votes in those counties to counter McDaniel’s lead. In Forrest, Grenada, Franklin, and Tishomingo Counties, all saw McDaniel win the county vote, but witnessed a net gain in votes for Cochran. The map below depicts the overall change in votes for Senator Cochran, elevated to show the overall voting turnout for the runoff. The height of each county shows the overall number of votes from the primary to the runoff, and the color depicts the gain for Cochran or loss for Cochran (also the gain for McDaniel) in terms of overall impact; meaning the gain by McDaniel is accounted for in Cochran’s numbers, and the same is true for McDaniel’s numbers accounting for Cochran’s votes.

http://www.wtva.com/news/national/story/MSU-Professor-shocked-by-Cochran-win/ZQBP08O3PUW6t0gopWY1RQ.cspx#.U6t5itptRMI.facebook

Data source: Politico.com, via AP

Note: Primary votes do not account for T. Carey votes
Take Home Points

A few things of note on this election that some should take note. First, the election was decided based on a surge in voters, up 20%, or 62,480 voters from the previous 313,483 voting in the primary. Of those individuals, 50.9%, 191,508 voters, voted for incumbent Senator Thad Cochran in the election, while 49.1, or 184,815 voted for State Senator Chris McDaniel. Outside of those numbers and the county breakdowns, it is unclear whether race, gender, income level, or any other factor played a role in the election, unless one makes claims based on speculation. Next, Cochran had major swings in voting from counties such as Hinds, Madison, Rankin, Oktibbeha, Forrest, and Lafayette Counties. Each county represented a net gain in votes from the primary for Senator Cochran of over 700 votes. Of particular interest is Forrest County, where Senator Cochran did not take the overall vote in the county, but the margin narrowed from 55/45 McDaniel to 51/49 McDaniel, resulting in a net gain of votes of 720 for Senator Cochran. Finally, one should note that the election is a popular election, and not electorate in nature. Therefore, any differences in voting should be viewed in terms of raw numbers and not in county/municipality terms. That stated, Senator Cochran saw an increase in net votes gained in 48 of the 82 counties, or roughly 58.5% of the counties, in Mississippi.

Implications for Future Elections

While it is unclear how this election will impact future elections in Mississippi, one point is abundantly clear; Mississippi voters care about who represents them in Washington, D.C. With record numbers voting in the Republican Senate Primary, one can only speculate as to the anticipated turnout for the general election in November. In addition, those viewing the elections as a county-based election should take some caution. Forrest County is a prime example of this advice. Forrest County did not vote in favor of Senator Cochran, however, the net change in votes between the primary and runoff proved larger for Senator Cochran than in all of the delta and coastal counties in Mississippi. The top 5 positive net voting changes for Senator Cochran, by county were Hinds, Madison, Rankin, Oktibbeha, and Forrest Counties. All together, these counties represented a net positive change in votes for Senator Cochran of 10,112 votes. No matter how one looks at this race, it was a positive note for the State of Mississippi to witness voters getting out and voting for their preferred candidate, whether that was State Senator McDaniel or incumbent US Senator Thad Cochran.

About the Author

Dr. Dallas Breen is the Executive Director at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development and an Assistant Research Professor at Mississippi State University. Dallas has an extensive research portfolio in local government, emergency management, disaster response and recovery, economic impact analysis, political redistricting, and human resource management. For more information, please call 662-325-3328.

NOTE: This document was constructed and published less than 24 hours after the election. Errors may exist.