



THE VIEW

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THOUGHTS ON 2011 ELECTIONS – ROUND ONE

BY
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As the first round of the 2011 primaries is in the books, things are very similar to what they might have been 40 years ago. While one party is packing up the campaign materials and anticipating taking the respective oaths of office, the other is looking for bright spots where it can find them. The only difference in now and then is that in the old days it was the Democrats measuring their offices for the drapes. Now it is the Democrats who are left to dig nuggets out of statistics that will serve as salve to the wounds of a struggling party. The Republicans are settling in.

As in the past, local races tended to dominate primaries. Those local races also saw a general trend of Republican gains. In 2003, the year of Governor Haley Barbour's first race, 73 percent of those who went to the polls in the primary voted Democratic. That figure for the Democrats was down to 69 percent in 2007, when the Republicans topped 30 percent for the first time ever. In this year's primary, 42 percent of those who voted cast their ballots on the Republican side of the polling place. Although short of the 50/50 split hoped for by Republicans like political observer and chronicler of the Republican Party evolution Andy Taggart, the Republican numbers were impressive, and represented yet another leap in the Party's effort to overtake the Democrats in their last remaining stronghold.

Mississippians have long enjoyed the sport of Governor's races and gubernatorial politics that occur every four years. This year there was very little blood drawn. On the Republican side Phil Bryant presented a textbook process of deciding on one's goals, and then methodically over four years building a case for accomplishing those objectives. Bryant was no doubt aware that he would not have the \$13 million that Governor Haley Barbour generated in each of his two previous runs. By using mass e-mail, video, and every form of social media on a daily basis, if necessary, Phil Bryant maximized his visibility during his four years as Lieutenant Governor. When the BP oil spill happened there was Bryant standing in the surf. Whether the issue was tornados or legislative fights, the voters could count on receiving an explanation of what the State planned to do from Lieutenant Governor Bryant.

Hence, by maximizing the use of his incumbency Phil Bryant overwhelmed the efforts of a handful of challengers who had never run in a statewide race.

Early on, it was thought that Gulf Coast businessman Dave Dennis would provide a stiff test for Bryant, but it became clear that Dennis' campaign did not understand the special effort that would be necessary for a first-timer in a political campaign to close the name recognition gap when running against a well-known incumbent. In the end, Bryant sailed into the Republican nomination with 59 percent of the vote, with Dave Dennis in double figures at 26 percent.

The Democratic side of the ticket did provide some intrigue for those who wait four years for electoral excitement. Hattiesburg Mayor Johnny Dupree led the ticket with 43 percent of the vote to 39 percent for Clarksdale attorney and businessman Bill Luckett. Both of the leading candidates had enough money to get through the first primary. Having to compete head-to-head in a runoff prior to attempting to climb the November General Election mountain to the Governor's mansion is a proposition both would have liked to avoid by winning outright in the first primary. As it stands now, Luckett is sitting in the traditional "catbird seat" to garner the bulk of the 17 percent of the votes of the minor candidates. That certainly does not have to be the case if Mayor Dupree can mount a full-blown turnout the vote effort. Dupree, an African-American, represents a rare opportunity to get a person of his ethnicity into the championship round with a shot at being governor.

Both Dupree and Luckett have the personal resume to hold the office of Governor. Can either hope to overcome a fragmented Democratic Party organization enough to provide a challenge to the heavily favored Phil Bryant?

In pondering that question it appears that the only shot that the Democratic nominee would have would be a campaign based on old-fashioned populism. Perhaps there is still a political market for that in Mississippi. Many of the program cuts and entitlement reforms being contemplated nationally by Republican leadership will land heavier on Mississippians than citizens of other states. These run the gamut from federal highway funds to agriculture commodity programs to Medicare and Medicaid. While Republicans certainly can and will make a case for the fiscal necessity to take this route, Democrats can make the case of the human price to be paid when such cutback strategies are pursued. The Democratic nominee simply maintaining that he can be almost as conservative as a Republican will not do much to stifle the yawns of the voters.

Does anyone know where Cliff Finch's lunch box and hard hat are? It may be necessary for the Democrats to pay a new visit to the "working man."

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