

Primary elections in five US states show intensifying political tensions

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18 May 2022

Democratic and Republican primary elections held across five states demonstrated the mounting crisis of the capitalist two-party system. The Republican Party is moving at a rapid pace in the direction of fascism, whether led by Trump or some other figure, while the Democratic Party is encountering popular opposition to its policy of bipartisan collaboration with what Biden calls his Republican “colleagues.”

The most ominous result was the nomination of State Senator Doug Mastriano as the Republican candidate for governor of Pennsylvania. Incumbent Democrat Tom Wolf is term-limited, and the Democratic nomination went to state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, who was unopposed.

Mastriano is among the most right-wing figures ever nominated by one of the two main capitalist parties to govern a major state. A retired Army colonel who won a state Senate election in 2018, he was the leader of the attempts by Republican state legislators to set aside the results of the 2020 presidential voting in Pennsylvania—won by Biden by a margin of 81,000 votes—and award that state’s 20 electoral votes to Trump.

He called a state Senate hearing after the election where Trump lawyers Rudy Giuliani and Jenna Ellis argued for overturning the vote. He visited the White House soon after, and then organized a group to participate in the January 6, 2021 rally at the White House where Trump urged his supporters to go to the Capitol. Mastriano claims that he left Washington before the fascist mob stormed the Capitol, looking to take hostages, and forced a shutdown of congressional certification of the electoral vote for several hours.

If Mastriano wins the general election in November and becomes governor, he will appoint Pennsylvania’s secretary of state, the official who oversees the state’s conduct of the 2024 presidential election. He has made repeated statements indicating that he would regard any outcome other than a Trump victory in 2024 as illegitimate.

Despite Mastriano’s identification with the “Stop the Steal” campaign, Trump did not endorse him until Saturday, three days before the vote, when it was clear from polling that he would win the primary because a half-dozen other candidates, more aligned with the Republican Party establishment in the state, were splitting the vote.

The result of Tuesday’s voting showed Mastriano with 44 percent of the vote, former Congressman Lou Barletta (a former Trump favorite as an advocate of trade war and persecution of

immigrants) with 20 percent and former US Attorney Bill McSwain, the lone critic of Trump, with 16 percent.

As these figures suggest—and this was the pattern in all five states—while Trump’s personal endorsement was frequently insufficient to win the Republican nomination for a candidate, virtually all the candidates ran as supporters of Trump and advocates of his fascist claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen by Biden and the Democrats.

The more publicized contest for the US Senate nomination in Pennsylvania was still undecided nearly 24 hours after the polls closed. Trump’s choice, surgeon turned media celebrity Mehmet Oz, was leading hedge fund capitalist David McCormick by the narrowest of margins, some 1,449 votes out of 1.33 million cast.

A third candidate, media pundit Kathy Barnette, made a late surge in the primary thanks to her advocacy of the most openly fascist policies—she called for outlawing both abortion and the Muslim religion—and an influx of millions in campaign funds from the Club for Growth, a major Wall Street political action committee. The result was a three-way split, with Oz at 31.2 percent, McCormick at 31.1 percent, and Barnette at 24.7 percent.

There was also a three-way split among top former Trump aides. While Trump himself backed Oz, much of his White House staff backed McCormick, who is married to Dina Powell, Trump’s deputy national security adviser. These included former campaign manager Kellyanne Conway, former Trump aide Hope Hicks, and Stephen Miller, Trump’s fascist adviser on immigration. Meanwhile, Michael Flynn, former national security adviser and advocate of a Trump coup after the election, and former Trump counselor Steve Bannon backed Barnette.

While Trump, in typical fashion, issued a statement urging Oz to declare victory in order to prevent manipulation of the count, both Oz and McCormick refrained from any such claim and appeared to accept the vote-counting (conducted by county governments, mostly Republican-run, but overseen by Democrats in the urban centers and by the Democratic-run state government) as legitimate. There were no suggestions that mail-in ballots were illegitimate or even suspect in the Republican primary, although that claim will certainly be raised in the general election.

The narrow margin was well within the limits set by the state of Pennsylvania for an automatic recount, so the outcome of the Republican Senate primary may not be known for several weeks. The eventual winner will face Democrat John Fetterman, the state’s lieutenant governor, who easily defeated Representative

Conor Lamb, a right-wing ex-Marine (one of those the WSWS has identified as CIA Democrats), who had the support of most of the party establishment and the corporate media.

Fetterman parlayed his endorsement of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and a tough-talking “biker” persona—he is six foot nine, tattooed, and rarely dressed in a coat and tie—to give himself a populist image. However, he was for eight years a loyal lieutenant in the administration of Governor Tom Wolf, a millionaire businessman who carried out pro-corporate policies, including budget austerity and the forced reopening of schools and businesses despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the one other closely contested race in the state, to succeed retiring Congressman Mike Doyle in Pittsburgh, state Representative Summer Lee had a narrow margin over the Democratic Party establishment choice Steve Irwin, an attorney specializing in “union avoidance” strategies for major employers. Doyle and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee backed Irwin, while Senator Bernie Sanders campaigned for Lee.

The Pennsylvania races set the pattern for many of the contests in the other four states: North Carolina, Kentucky, Idaho and Oregon.

In North Carolina, Representative Ted Budd won the Republican nomination to succeed retiring Senator Richard Burr. He will face Democratic nominee Cheri Beasley, a former justice of the state Supreme Court, in the fall.

In the most closely contested congressional primary in North Carolina, incumbent Republican Representative Madison Cawthorn was narrowly defeated by State Senator Chuck Edwards. Cawthorn had Trump’s endorsement, although Trump never campaigned for him, while Edwards had the support of virtually the entire party establishment and all its elected officials, who viewed Cawthorn’s erratic personal conduct—not his fascist political views—as disqualifying.

As the *New York Times* noted, Trump’s endorsement was not a guarantee of victory in a Republican primary, but it did deliver a third of the vote. In those races where there were multiple candidates splitting the vote, a third of the vote was enough to win. In others it was not.

Ohio Senate candidate J. D. Vance received 32 percent of the vote and won handily. In Nebraska, gubernatorial candidate Charles Herbster got 30 percent and lost badly. In Pennsylvania, Senate candidate Mehmet Oz got 31 percent and the result was a virtual tie. Similarly, Cawthorn received 32 percent and narrowly lost, while Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin in Idaho took 32 percent and was badly beaten in her primary challenge of incumbent Governor Brad Little. All had been endorsed by Trump.

There were only two contested primaries in which Trump intervened and clearly helped propel a candidate to a landslide victory: the May 10 congressional race in West Virginia, where two Republican incumbents were forced to run against each other because of redistricting; and Tuesday’s Senate contest in North Carolina. In both of these contests, the winning candidates had both the endorsement of Trump and the financial support of the Club for Growth, the leading Republican Wall Street PAC.

In the Democratic primaries, mounting discontent with the policies of the Biden administration and the congressional

Democratic leadership was demonstrated, both in the nominations of Fetterman and Lee in Pennsylvania, and in two congressional districts in Oregon.

In central Oregon, Representative Kurt Schrader, a 10-term incumbent who is a leader of the right-wing “Blue Dog” faction and helped last year to block a push to allow Medicare to negotiate lower prescription drug prices, was apparently defeated by liberal attorney Jamie McLeod-Skinner, although a final tally was delayed because of problems in the vote count in one large county. Oregon’s vote is conducted entirely by mail.

In the sixth district, newly created because of population growth in the Portland area, state Representative Andrea Salinas won the Democratic nomination despite more than \$8 million expended on behalf of Carrick Flynn, an IT executive. Flynn not only had \$1 million from the House Majority PAC controlled by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, he had \$7 million dumped into his campaign by crypto-currency billionaire Sam Bankman-Fried, an enormous sum for a single congressional district.

In three other open districts, however, in seats covering Louisville, Kentucky; Raleigh, North Carolina; and a heavily African-American rural area of northeastern North Carolina, the candidates backed by the party leadership and financed by PACs linked to tech billionaires prevailed against self-styled “progressive” challengers.

In none of these campaigns, Republican or Democratic, were the fundamental issues facing working people raised: the danger of world war arising from US intervention in Ukraine; the ongoing threat of the global pandemic; the rise of fascism and threats to democratic rights; or the mounting financial and economic crisis.

The two-party system remains a vital line of defense for the capitalist ruling elite, which disenfranchises the working class, the vast majority of the population. A central political task of the working class is to break through this barrier and establish its independence from all forms of capitalist politics.



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