
Election Analysis

The real lesson from the Duke vote

by Harley Schlanger

The nation's political elites and pundits are still in shock over the results from the primary election for the U.S. Senate in Louisiana on Oct. 6. When the votes were tallied, Democratic incumbent Sen. J. Bennett Johnston was reelected with 53% of the vote, narrowly defeating his chief opponent, "former" Nazi and Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who is presently a Republican state representative.

What caused the shock is that Duke received more than 600,000 votes, 44% of those cast, despite wide recognition of his past open avowal of Nazism and his appeal for votes on the basis of Nazi-like policies and racism. Duke carried 20 of the state's 64 parishes, including all but one in northeast Louisiana.

Duke received his votes in spite of active opposition from his own party. The Republican Party's National Committee (RNC), from the White House on down, denounced him and campaigned against him. They deployed reinforcements to promote the campaign of State Sen. Ben Bagert, even sending Lt. Col. Oliver North on a campaign junket for him. When Bagert's campaign failed to register even 10% in the polls, he dropped out, throwing his support to Johnston.

The news media, led by the *Washington Post* and NBC national news, gave the race extensive coverage. Yet, their fascination with Duke (they focused on his "charisma" and his "sincerity") allowed him to dominate the race and define the issues, even as they attacked him and bemoaned his apparent popularity.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which regularly encourages neo-Nazis in order better to wield its anti-Semitism slanders against the ADL's actual political enemies, used the situation to do what it does best, raising funds by warning of the danger posed by Duke, while still managing to hide behind their tax-exempt status.

Given Duke's well-known past as a leader of openly racist, anti-Semitic organizations, and the opposition of such august institutions as the RNC, the Establishment press, and the ADL, the question naturally arises: How did Duke come so close to forcing a runoff against a well-financed, three-term incumbent?

Voter rebellion brewing

Duke's support comes almost entirely from white voters who feel most threatened by Louisiana's near-decade-long economic collapse. He appeals to their frustration over growing unemployment, collapsing living standards, deteriorating government services in spite of higher taxes, and the decline of safe, drug-free communities and schools.

This frustration and fear is evolving into a growing rage against incumbents. It is not limited to Louisiana but is spreading nationwide, with targets ranging from the White House and Congress, to state and local officials.

The continuing budget debacle in Washington has served to confirm what many "outside the Beltway" have concluded: The political elites are out of touch with the urgent needs of the nation and do only what is necessary to get reelected, holding the electorate in contempt. As depression conditions deepen and despair increases, demagogues such as Duke will find fertile ground for their simplistic, xenophobic diatribes.

Not so different from George Bush

But there is another side to this, which has been missed by most of the nation's political cognoscenti: Duke's basic appeal on issues is not very different from that of George Bush. Remember Bush's 1988 campaign, in which he rode the not-so-subtle racist Willie Horton ads into the White House? One can find in the Duke campaign a great deal of George Bush's political agenda—from the Willie Horton-style appeals, to attacks on "government waste," to obsessive use of patriotic symbols like the American flag, to Theodore Roosevelt-style "environmentalism."

In fact, Bagert, with full support from the White House, tried to win over Duke's supporters to his ill-fated campaign by mimicking Duke's attack on welfare and affirmative action, arguing merely that he is more "credible" because he has no Nazi past.

There is some evidence that the similarities on many issues between Duke and the "Bush agenda" are not coincidental, and that Duke has backing from the "spookier" side of George Bush's intelligence community. There are ongoing investigations into connections between Duke and one of the Bush administration's primary covert operations, Project Democracy, as well as into the obviously symbiotic, mutually advantageous relationship between Duke and the Anti-Defamation League.

As in the case of the rise of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Workers' Party, there is considerable evidence of such behind-the-scenes backing. In a recently released biography of Duke (*David Duke: Evolution of a Klansman*), author Michael Zatarain indicates that there is more to Duke's support than meets the eye. Duke told him, "I didn't just happen along. I've had long relations with many people who I'm certain would rather not have their names linked with mine."