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The 2024 Primary Losers



David de la Fuente, Senior Political Analyst

The 2024 primaries for Senate and House continued the long tradition of individual members of Congress overwhelmingly winning renomination. However, four House members fell to challengers. This was an occurrence on both sides of the aisle, with two Republicans and two Democrats losing renomination. Yet while the numbers of losses were the same, the reasons were vastly different. On the Republican side, incumbents lost because they were insufficiently loyal to Donald Trump. On the Democratic side, incumbents lost because they opposed President Joe Biden's agenda when it delivered meaningful results for their communities.

Republican Disloyalty to Trump

The first incumbent to lose in 2024 was in a race that was out of the norm. The state of Alabama was required to redraw their congressional map after it was found that it intentionally discriminated against Black residents in the state. Black voters from Birmingham to Selma to Montgomery were

drawn into one congressional district. This occurred while six districts across the state were drawn with majorities of white voters, despite the state's population being 27% Black. In 2023, after decades of injustice, Alabama was required to draw two congressional districts that would give Black residents a meaningful choice in electing candidates of their choice. Alabama's 2nd congressional district was redrawn to connect Montgomery to Mobile, which made it unwinnable for its previous incumbent, Congressman Barry Moore. Moore, who lived in the new Alabama's 1st congressional district, decided to run against Congressman Jerry Carl who was the incumbent in that district. Therefore, one incumbent had to lose, and it ended up being Carl.

Carl had represented more of the district's voters than Moore heading into their primary, but Moore ran a campaign better suited to primary voters in this deep red Alabama district. According to data from Ad Impact, Carl aired 10 unique television ads during his primary. In some of Carl's most aired ads, he attacked Biden on the border and pledged to impeach Biden but didn't once mention Trump.¹ Another ad was an entirely positive biography, with no mention of Trump.² In all, only 60% of his ads mentioned his support for Trump.

Moore ran eight unique television ads and all featured Trump. His most-aired ad even started with a picture of Moore and Trump together with footage of a rally of Trump praising Moore.³ Ads frequently highlighted Moore's 2015 endorsement of Trump as well as using language like "Stand with Barry and Trump."⁴ Trump officially remained neutral in this primary, but Moore made sure primary voters saw him as the one bearhugging the former president. A majority of primary voters decided to send Carl home to Alabama because of that—and send Moore back to Washington.

In Virginia, a more traditional primary defeat occurred as ultra-conservative Freedom Caucus Chair Bob Good met his demise thanks to Trump endorsing his primary opponent. Good's crime was endorsing Ron DeSantis for President over Trump. Good's primary opponent John McGuire ran seven unique television ads which all featured Trump, including one of the former president direct to camera speaking for the entire ad.⁵ Good was unwilling to air television ads, but Conservative Outsider PAC and House Freedom Action handled the airways for him. Their ads mainly tried to paint McGuire as a liberal and Good as the true conservative and even referred to Good as a "Trump Republican."⁶ But Republican primary voters ultimately chose McGuire thanks to the Trump seal of approval, sending Good, an insufficiently loyal ideological purist, packing.

Democratic Desire to Deliver

The two Democratic incumbents to lose this cycle in primaries were Representatives Jamaal Bowman of New York and Cori Bush of Missouri, both members of the ultra-progressive "Squad" in the House. In the 117th United States Congress from 2021 to 2023, Democrats had a federal government trifecta and were able to pass some pieces of their agenda through party-line votes. For most of that Congress, Democrats hovered at around a five-seat majority, so every vote counted.

Bush voted against Biden's agenda the third most of any House Democrat, while Bowman featured sixth on that list. In fact, the six-member Squad ranked second through seventh on that list of frequent opponents.⁷

Over the last year, United Democracy Project (UDP), a surrogate group of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), launched efforts to defeat Bowman and Bush in the Democratic primary over their positions on Israel and Palestine. However, UDP did not do significant paid media around those issues, rather hitting Bowman and Bush both on voting against landmark legislation that delivered for their districts. Their ads highlighted votes against the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act which created jobs, rebuilt roads, and replaced lead pipes, and the Bipartisan Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, which among other accomplishments ensured Social Security and Medicare payments remained secure.⁸ The most aired ad in Missouri against Bush was not about disloyalty to Biden but rather focused on how she had never passed a bill and had missed nearly 200 roll call votes.⁹

Justice Democrats, the group that helped Bowman and Bush beat incumbents in Democratic primaries in 2020, ran ads highlighting that Bowman and Bush voted with Biden 94% of the time.¹⁰ This actually mirrored their successful strategies in 2020, in which they hit Congressmen Eliot Engel and Lacy Clay as unreliable partners in some key accomplishments of the Obama Administration, with a Justice Democrats spokesperson going as far to say in 2020 that “Cori hit him on numerous vulnerabilities, which included that he opposed President Obama’s efforts on reining in predatory lending.” Bowman himself criticized Engel’s voting record, saying “You voted against President Obama’s Iran [nuclear] deal.”

In both of these cases, Democratic primary voters ousted two members of Congress who chose ideological purity over results. Even in safe blue districts, Democratic voters wanted to see their representatives work with the President to get things done.

Conclusion

Republican and Democratic primary voters continue to overwhelmingly approve of the jobs their incumbents are doing. The rare exceptions are due to dissatisfaction that could not be more dissimilar. Republican primary voters want to know what a member has done to express loyalty to Trump, while Democratic primary voters want to know what a member has done for their district. This distinction is critical in understanding governing philosophy and goals of each party ahead of the 47th president and the 119th United States Congress being sworn into office in January of 2025.

ENDNOTES

- 1.** “Good Neighbor,” Jan. 06, 2024. “Open Invitation,” Feb. 02, 2024. “Nuts,” Feb. 02, 2024.
- 2.** “Told Them,” Nov. 28, 2023.
- 3.** “Alabama Values,” Jan. 08, 2024.
- 4.** “I’ve Done It,” Jan. 24, 2024. “Barry Moore Shoots Straight,” Feb. 07, 2024.
- 5.** “Sniper GOTV,” June 10, 2024.
- 6.** “Flip Flop,” June 07, 2024.
- 7.** Jared Golden, a member of the Blue Dog Coalition, who represented a district that voted for Donald Trump by seven percentage points ranked first.
- 8.** “Not Helping Us,” July 04, 2024. “The Record,” July 13, 2024. “His Own Agenda,” May 16, 2024. “Refused to Compromise,” June 18, 2024.
- 9.** “Zero Bills Passed.” July 15, 2024.
- 10.** “Fight,” June 18, 2024. “Protect Abortion Right,” July 09, 2024. “This Election Is Easy,” July 26, 2024.