

## Instead of challenging his Mississippi primary election result, Chris McDaniel should work to prioritize open access to the ballot box.

*On June 24<sup>th</sup>, six-term incumbent Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran won his Republican open primary race, a result that was immediately challenged by his Tea Party opponent, Chris McDaniel. [Rolda Darlington](#) writes that McDaniel's challenges are not doing him any favors, in light of Mississippi's past history of African-Americans voter suppression up until the 1960s. She argues that if McDaniel really is in favor of democracy, as he claims, then must accept that thousands of African-Americans supported his opponent, in spite of their political identification or affiliation.*



It was 50 years ago this summer that a large part of America's youth was losing its mind over a British invasion. Beatles fever was running rampant and music lovers all over the country were counting their pocket change to purchase the newest craze. But during this very same summer, in this very same country, another fever was breaking loose in the streets. All across the country, young adults were leaving their schools for the summer, saying goodbye to their friends and families, and catching busses to various parts of the southern state of Mississippi to embark on a journey they could not have imagined. With idealism and hope filling their hearts and naivety consuming their minds, volunteers, both White and Black, convened all around Mississippi with an aim toward equality, justice, and voting rights for African-Americans. Stories of voter suppression during this period would make the North Carolinas and Virginias of today blush. In Mississippi, in the days of Freedom Summer and in the year preceding the Voting Rights Act of 1965, voter suppression was not a partisan tactic, but a way of life and one that would be hard-fought.

So, considering the long and arduous history of Mississippi, especially as it pertains to equality in the ballot box, it presents as quite a curious case that one of its contemporary standard-bearers would engage in such boisterous noise-making about his most recent fate as a challenger for the state's Senate seat. Chris McDaniel, the Tea Party candidate who ran against the conservative Republican incumbent, Thad Cochran, in Mississippi's Senate primary race earlier this year, faces quite a historical doozy as a resident of the great state. As his campaign persists with its challenge to the results of the election, a question pushes its way into the discussion: in light of Mississippi's controversial history on the issue of the African-American vote, is McDaniel doing himself any favors by insisting that he lost as a result of illegitimate voting by Mississippi constituents?

What is an illegitimate voter in the first place? According to McDaniel, the conclusion of the Mississippi Senate race was not the unfair result of stuffing the ballot box. McDaniel has not accused election officials of bribing or coercing voters. Rather, McDaniel asserts that many who voted in the Senate primary run-off election on June 24<sup>th</sup> were not eligible voters in the Republican primary. Keep in mind that Mississippi holds open primaries, allowing for all registered voters to vote in Senate primaries regardless of their registered party identification. Unlike many other states which only allow registered members of a political party to vote for primary candidates, and [still other states](#) which employ a semi-closed system, according to Mississippi law, voters do not have to be registered with a particular party to vote in that party's primary, and if a voter does not vote in the primary, they can cast a ballot for either party's run-off.

The June 3<sup>rd</sup> primary held in Mississippi ended with each candidate earning less than the required percentage of the vote. As the June 24<sup>th</sup> run-off election came to an end, Cochran won by 7,667 votes, many of which McDaniel contends came from ineligible voters. Cochran's victory apparently came as a result of cross-over voting by African-American Democrats. This development prompted McDaniel to allege that there was evidence of voter fraud, insecure ballot boxes, and other issues of election integrity. Cochran's camp responded by contending that African-Americans came out to support Cochran's campaign due to four decades of relationship building with the

African-American community of Mississippi.

So as McDaniel continues to file legal challenges to the Senate primary election in which Cochran, the veteran incumbent, held on to his seat, the wisdom of those like Fannie Lou Hamer, voting and civil rights activist, comes to mind. The daughter of Mississippi and Civil Rights activist of an earlier, more treacherous time in this country's history, Hamer had much to say about the rights of African-Americans to express their policy preferences, rally around the ballot box, and be civically engaged. As she testified in front of Congress in the early 1960s, making the case for expanding the electorate to include those who were excluded due to race, she aimed to make the case for why the Democratic process benefits when everyone is encouraged to get involved. McDaniel's political tantrum shows that the democratic canon that all measures must be taken to extend the voting franchise to as many constituents as possible, regardless of political identification or affiliation, is woefully lost on him, especially as he finds himself on the losing end of an election.

The painful truth is that African-American voters who did not choose to exercise their right to vote in the Senate primary the first time, made an effort to ensure that while they could not guarantee the general election to a Democratic candidate, if they were fated to see a Republican represent their state, better that they dance with the devil they know than dance with a Tea Party devil. To lose an election because your opponent was able to stimulate voters who did not turn out for the June 3<sup>rd</sup> election may be a blow to McDaniel's ego, and most certainly to his political career. In the end, however, one who aspires to serve as a representative of the great state of Mississippi, and by extension, a steward of the democratic process and the nation, McDaniel should work to prioritize open access to the ballot box over his wounded pride. The most compelling lesson to be learned in this tale of sour grapes and a sound political smack-down: In the heat of Beatle Mania, perhaps McDaniel should have put 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' and 'Love Me Do' to the side for a more fitting tune like 'We Shall Overcome.'

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