News



Former Alabama Chief Justice and U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore waves to the crowd during his election party, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017, in Montgomery, Ala. Moore won the Alabama Republican primary runoff for U.S. Senate on Tuesday, defeating an appointed incumbent backed by President Donald Trump and allies of Sen. Mitch McConnell. (AP/Brynn Anderson)

Yonat Shimron

View Author Profile

RNS

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Montgomery, Alabama — September 27, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Firebrand jurist Roy Moore won the Alabama Republican primary runoff for U.S. Senate on Tuesday, defeating an appointed incumbent backed by both President Donald Trump and deep-pocketed allies of Sen. Mitch McConnell.

In an upset certain to rock the GOP establishment, Moore clinched a nine-point victory over Sen. Luther Strange to take the GOP nomination for the seat previously held by Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Moore will face Democrat Doug Jones in a Dec. 12 special election.

It was a political resurrection for the 70-year-old former Alabama chief justice who was twice removed from those duties after taking stands for public display of the Ten Commandments and against gay marriage. Moore, in his victory speech, returned to themes of God and government, saying that he had "never prayed to win this campaign" but only that's "God's will be done."

"We have to return the knowledge of God and the Constitution of the United States to the United States Congress," Moore told a cheering crowd in his victory party in Montgomery.

Moore predicted the race could be a bellwether for the 2018 midterms, saying the victory tells the establishment in "Washington, D.C., that their wall has been cracked and will now fall."

The race has pitted Trump against his former strategist Steve Bannon who had argued Moore was a better fit for the "populist" movement. Introducing Moore, Bannon told a frenzied crowd that the victory was a repudiation of the "fat cats" of Washington who pumped millions into the Alabama race to boost Strange.

Bannon declared Moore's win a victory for Trump, despite the president's support for Strange. Moore said he supports the president and his agenda.

After the race, Trump tweeted his congratulations to Moore, noting that "Luther Strange started way back & ran a good race." Trump and Moore spoke by telephone later Tuesday night.

The Senate Leadership Fund, a group with ties to McConnell, had spent an estimated $9 million trying to secure the nomination for Strange.

President and CEO Steven Law said Tuesday that Moore won the nomination "fair and square" and the group will now back him. Law says Moore "has our support, as it is vital that we keep this seat in Republican hands."

In a statement, McConnell congratulated Moore and said Senate Republicans are committed to keeping the seat in GOP hands.

Even though Alabama has not sent a Democrat to the U.S. Senate in two decades, Democrats are hopeful they have an opening in the December election against Moore.

Jones is a former U.S. attorney best known for prosecuting the Klansmen who killed four girls in a 1963 church bombing. He said Tuesday that he wanted to focus the race on the "kitchen table issues" that matter to all Alabamians, "health care, education for our kids, jobs and a living wage."

Strange supporters were at least somewhat divided on how they will approach the general election in December.

"It will be closer than if Luther had won" the nomination, said Perry Hooper, a former state lawmaker who predicted some Republicans will stay home in December or even vote for Jones.

But Hooper, who served as Trump's Alabama campaign chief, said he's all in for Moore. "Ultimately, this is about helping the president," Hooper said. "This is a Republican state, and Roy will help the president."

Moore was twice elected chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court and twice removed from those duties. In 2003, he was removed from office for disobeying a

federal judge's order to remove a Ten Commandments monument from the state courthouse lobby. Last year, he was permanently suspended after a disciplinary panel ruled he had urged probate judges to defy federal court decisions on gay marriage and deny wedding licenses to same-sex couples. He denied that accusation.

Strange told his supporters that "we wish (Moore) well going forward." But he quickly shifted to his own bewilderment at the race he just finished.

"We're dealing with a political environment that I've never had any experience with," Strange said.

Advertisement

Strange also thanked Trump and Vice President Mike Pence for backing him. Trump, Strange said, may "be criticized" for coming to Alabama on his behalf. "Sometimes it's just about friendship ... a common goal to make the country better," he said.

Moore, propelled by evangelical voters, consolidated support from a number of anti-establishment forces, including the pro-Trump Great America Alliance and Bannon.

Moore led Strange by about 25,000 votes in the crowded August primary, which went to a runoff between the two because neither topped 50 percent in the voting. The low-turnout election gave an advantage to Moore as his loyal supporters flooded the polls.

Strange, the state's former attorney general, was appointed to Sessions' seat in February by then-Gov. Robert Bentley, who resigned two months later as lawmakers opened impeachment hearings against him. Throughout the Senate race, Strange had been dogged by criticisms of accepting the appointment from a scandal-battered governor when his office was in charge of corruption investigations.

On the outskirts of Montgomery, 76-year-old Air Force retiree John Lauer said Trump's endorsement swayed him to vote for Strange on Tuesday.

"I voted for Strange. I'm a Trump voter. Either one is going to basically do the Trump agenda, but since Trump came out for Luther, I voted for Luther," said Lauer said.

Many at Moore's victory party had supported the former chief justice through the years in his stands over the Ten Commandments and other issues.

"I'm so happy. I prayed and God answered my prayers," Patricia Riley Jones of Abbeville said as she outstretched her arms to hold a Moore sign and America flags high aloft above her head. "He's a great Christian man. He stood up for God."

(Associated Press writer Jay Reeves contributed to this story.)