



THE VIEW

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THE FIRST PRIMARY: CLARIFYING THE QUESTIONS

BY

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Perhaps many of you of my generation are like me in that we are still getting used to the fact that most of the questions answered by elections are no longer being solved in the August primaries. Indeed, the primaries have become the mechanism whereby the stage is set for the main event in November. Welcome to the era of two-party politics in Mississippi.

The Stennis Institute is awaiting certified data to take a microscopic look at what the numbers say about the geographic and demographic patterns of votes for the Republican and Democratic parties. We do, however, know who the nominees are for almost all of the statewide races, and thus it should be instructive to join the speculation concerning what is about to unfold before us this fall. While the candidates are catching their breaths and shoring up their finances for traditional Labor Day general election kickoff efforts we can take a few moments to specify some questions that will perhaps be answered during the campaign.

As expected, Republican incumbent Governor Haley Barbour and Democratic challenger John Arthur Eaves, Jr. treated the August 7th party primary as a mere formality. Governor Barbour is certainly the prohibitive favorite to stroll through the general election as well. This doesn't mean the young Eaves is not on his mind, as evidenced by Governor Barbour's pronouncement that this will be a race between himself as the conservative and Eaves as the liberal. The Governor continues to amass a campaign war chest that easily surpasses that of all other candidates of both parties combined. The first question out there is:

what is Barbour going to do with all that money? The options are to place it on down ticket statewide races to strengthen the loyalty within the executive branch, sprinkle it across legislative races in an attempt to inch closer to a Republican majority in both houses, or to use it all to produce a convincing victory over the 40 year old Eaves as the Democratic standard bearer. The questions for Eaves and the Democrats are: can Eaves actually land enough blows on the popular Governor to get the voters' attention; and if so will he do his Democratic Party colleagues a favor by causing Haley Barbour to concentrate more than he has planned on his own campaign?

Just as the case with the primary it is possible that the race for Lieutenant Governor will provide the tightest contest in the fall general election. Democratic nominee Jamie Franks was somewhat of an afterthought in the early days of the primary with all eyes being focused on the race between State Auditor Phil Bryant and Senator Charlie Ross. But on more than one occasion Representative Franks used his speaking opportunities to maximum effectiveness, uniformly impressing observers with his ability to articulate the issues and his political philosophy. Now he is poised to make Phil Bryant's long hot campaign even longer. The general "coffee shop" talk has been that Bryant and Franks appeal to a similar "forks of the road" constituency, thus making it difficult to draw a contrast between the two. Both are decidedly conservative and share many of the values of rural and small town Mississippians. However, on election night and on a couple of occasions prior to that, Bryant addressed the growing tax debate in a way that will draw a sharp, classically Republican versus Democrat contrast between the two. Auditor Bryant spurned any support for a cut in the regressive and recently hotly debated sales tax on groceries in favor of a cut in Mississippi's fairly flat, but progressive, income tax cut. This presents Franks with the opportunity to compare, for voter consumption, his support for cutting a tax whose greatest impact is on the poorest of citizens with Auditor Bryant's support of a cut in the tax that captures revenues from the more well-to-do at the upper end of the income scale. Will Jamie Franks indeed be able to use issues such as the tax debate to draw a populist versus elitist battle line between himself and Phil Bryant? Given the role as Governor Barbour's point man for his legislative program that Bryant is seeking to play, is his position on an income tax cut a hint at what's to come on the Governor's promised examination of the Mississippi tax structure?

The number of questions to plug into your political observation radar are too numerous to address here. For instance, will a significant amount of Haley Barbour's campaign dollars find their way into the effort of formidable

Republican Attorney General candidate Al Hopkins to unseat the Governor's rival Democrat Attorney General Jim Hood? Will Democrat and veteran legislator Rob Smith's strong showing in the primary be enough to draw an increased flow of campaign dollars in his general election race for Secretary of State against Republican nominee Delbert Hoseman? What will be the issues in the Insurance Commissioner's race now that incumbent George Dale has been dispatched? Will Republican Mike Chaney's legislative career and the momentum generated by Governor Barbour be sufficient to enable him to overcome Gary Anderson's statewide name recognition and his first primary victory? These are just a few of the questions and there will be many more. You will have until November to get the answers.

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