



# THE VIEW

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## HAVE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS EVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT?

BY

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Perhaps never in any of our lifetimes have the races for Mississippi Legislative seats been as important. This new era of two party politics is causing traditionally independent minded Mississippians to focus on party as never before. In the old days anyone who wanted a realistic chance to win an election knew that you had to run as a Democrat. As far as the legislature was concerned, if said candidate was successful in getting there, he quickly learned that to move into a position of responsibility he or she had to find favor with the powers that be atop the monolithic Democratic Party hierarchy. Furthermore, there was never any concern as to whether legislative majorities and leadership and the Governor would be of different parties. There, in effect, was only one party. Kirk Fordice came along and spoiled all of that by becoming the first Republican since reconstruction to be elected Governor. His break through two term period as Governor demonstrated the frustrations associated with being a Republican Governor tasked with getting a legislative agenda to be seriously considered by a predominantly Democratic legislature.

Time and events in recent years have continued the efforts that Governor Fordice started so that now the two parties are approaching absolute parity numbers wise and the Republicans are giving every indication that they know how to play the game the Republican way. It goes without saying that the current political heavy weight champion in Mississippi is Governor Haley Barbour. A political strategist of national prominence, Governor Barbour has brought immense "know how" in the uses of electronic databases, the internet, and fundraising to the Mississippi political scene. The piece of the puzzle that

has proven somewhat difficult to yet fine tune to his liking has been the legislative process. The contest is now on to see how many Senators and how many members of the State House of Representatives will come to town in January wearing the red jerseys of the Republicans or the blue jerseys of the Democrats.

When the Senate left town last spring the Republicans had edged into a one seat lead by virtue of the defection of veteran Senator Tommy Gollott from the Democrats to the Republicans. In the House the Democrats held onto a significant but somewhat deceptive lead. What is at stake in this election with regard to the legislature and with Governor Barbour's legislative plans? In the House veteran Representative and current House Speaker Billy McCoy holds forth as the lead Democratic counter balance to Barbour lead legislative efforts. He has managed to hold together a coalition composed of the Democratic Party oriented, but often independent acting, black caucus membership and more conservative rural white Democrats during Governor Barbour's first term. Speaker McCoy has done this despite recovering from significant health problems that arose early in the term. Democrat Representative Jeff Smith from Columbus has already announced a challenge to McCoy. Representative Smith is known as one of the most conservative members of the legislature and one who is quite willing to cooperate with those pursuing Governor Barbour's legislative agenda. While many say that Speaker McCoy's numbers are holding up, much will depend on the outcomes of the House races.

The situation in the Senate is equally intriguing if not so straight forward. The Lieutenant Governor's race is, by all accounts, a very close one. Governor Barbour craves a cooperative Lieutenant Governor as an entry point for his legislative program in the Senate where the Republican's have the greatest chance of actually having a stable Barbour friendly voting majority. Republican Lt. Gubernatorial candidate Phil Bryant would certainly gladly pledge to join the Barbour team in that role. On the other hand Democrat Jamie Franks has proven himself to be as conservative as Bryant but very much an independent thinker within the Democratic Party ranks. Here's where the complications begin. A Republican Senate headed by a Republican Lt. Governor in Phil Bryant offers a happy hunting ground for Governor Barbour's legislative agenda. This would include coveted committee chairmanships being assigned along party lines if Bryant follows through on his campaign pronouncements. If, however, the Senate returns to the Democratic Party column as could very possibly happen and if Jamie Franks overcomes Phil Bryant in the Lt. Governor's race then there is potential for considerable ideological struggle on

a number of issues between the legislative and executive branches. Wait, that's not all. If either of the Lt. Gubernatorial candidates gets elected with a majority of the Senate from the opposite party then the potential for high strategy on the part of the Senate membership exists. The current Senate rules which came into existence during the Brad Dye days could be altered by the membership of the Senate to give the greater power for Senate organization and steering the course of legislation to the membership at the expense of the Lt. Governor.

If all of the above were not enough, it should not be forgotten that it is this legislature that will be charged with the task of redistricting following the 2010 census and prior to the 2011 Mississippi elections. In Mississippi and around the nation as the parties have become so evenly matched nothing has proven to be so virulently political as the parameter setting process of legislative redistricting. In this the majority party in the legislature holds the upper hand.

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William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

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