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Politics, Not Race, Defeated Artur Davis [Abigail Thernstrom]

Artur Davis has lost his bid to become the Democratic nominee for governor of Alabama. He didn't just lose: The four-term congressman went down to disastrous defeat, getting under 38 percent of the vote.

I wanted to believe. I thought he might pull it off. It will be said by many that there was never a smidgen of a chance. He was *black*, after all. Running in Alabama!

Alabama used to be a racial hell. It was, as the *Almanac of American Politics* put it, "ground zero of white resistance to the empowerment of blacks in the 1950s and 1960s." There was George Wallace and Bull Connor, the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the Birmingham jail.

But that was decades ago. "Our state has changed, and my candidacy would be impossible if the state had not already changed," Davis noted in the course of the campaign. He wasn't wrong. But he underestimated just how risky his political strategy would turn out to be.

In many ways, Davis resembles Barack Obama. He had an elite education, and he ran as an above-race candidate. But Davis deviated on a vital issue: Alone among members of the Congressional Black Caucus, he opposed Obama's health-care bill. You couldn't call yourself "black" and vote against Obamacare, Jesse Jackson announced in November — and the Alabama civil-rights community agreed. The state's two predominantly black organizations, the Alabama Democratic Conference and the Alabama New South Coalition, endorsed his white opponent, Ron Sparks. For the black political establishment, the white agricultural commissioner was a better Democrat. Ideology trumped color.

Davis also turned his back on the Alabama Education Association, a weighty presence in Alabama Democratic politics. Davis is an advocate for charter schools, which the state has banned; Sparks, on the other hand, is a big supporter of a state lottery and of casinos — snake oil to solve the state's financial problems, which are affecting its schools.

President Obama's falling fortunes may have had an impact. Obama and Davis are personal friends, despite the health-care vote, and Davis was the first congressman outside of Illinois to endorse Obama for president in 2008. When Davis first announced his candidacy, the president was riding high. But by now, Democrats are not so enamored. "We have one bait-and-switch Harvard-educated person occupying the White

House. Why elect another in Alabama?” asked one voter.

The black leadership in the state opposed him, so Davis did not have solid black support; his white support was also shaky. In short, he had no base. Nevertheless, was race the real story? The proverbial elephant in the room?

Blacks, like whites, lose elections for a multitude of political reasons. We have no data to suggest race was the decisive factor; no polling prior to the election suggested it might be. To the contrary: The story appears to be normal politics prevailing in the capital of the Confederacy. Even the Black Belt counties came through for him only weakly. Moreover, turnout everywhere was low.

Still, civil-rights organizations will read the results as clear evidence that white voters, especially in the South, cannot be trusted; heavy federal oversight over election matters in the region remains much needed, they will argue. Two constitutional challenges to the most draconian provision of the Voting Rights Act have recently been filed. The Davis defeat will be used against the plaintiffs.

“I am an Alabamian by birth, and I know what it would mean to see Artur Davis sworn in on the same steps where George Wallace stood,” Georgia’s Rep. John Lewis has said. Davis is a young man (41). He lost his first congressional bid and came back to win two years later. His political career is not necessarily over, and Lewis may yet see Davis occupy the office once held by the man who declared “segregation forever.” Politics, not race, defeated Davis; different politics on a different day may hand him the victory he sought yesterday.

— *Abigail Thernstrom is the author, most recently, of Voting Rights — and Wrongs: The Elusive Quest for Racially Fair Elections. She is an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.*

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