



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 9, 2012

Tea Party-favored Candidate Defeats Sen. Lugar in Ind. GOP Primary

On the morning of a critical Republican U.S. Senate primary in Indiana Tuesday, six-term incumbent Richard Lugar pronounced himself “ready with vim and vigor” to “do the Lord’s fight today.” If so, the Lord just lost a Senate seat in Indiana and lost it by a wide margin. Republican challenger Richard Mourdock, a Tea Party favorite, captured more than 60 percent of the vote to oust Lugar in the veteran Senator’s first primary battle since he was elected to the Senate for the first time in 1976.



It was an upset without a surprise, however, as virtually everybody but Lugar appeared to be expecting a win by Mourdock, the state Treasurer. Still, it was a steep descent for the 80-year-old incumbent, who was so popular when he ran for his sixth term that even the Democrats did not put up a candidate against him in 2006, when the Democrats nationally won control of both houses of Congress. In this year’s very different political climate, Lugar’s “age, his home, his conservative credentials and his voting record all were under assault,” [wrote Mary Beth Schneider in the Indianapolis Star](#).

Lugar, the former chairman and current ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was widely respected by colleagues in both parties for what has often been described as his bipartisan, consensus-building approach to issues. While he was supported by fellow Republican office-holders, including Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels and Arizona Sen. John McCain, the party’s 2008 presidential candidate, he had friends and well-wishers on both sides of the aisle who believe his presence will be missed in the next session of Congress. Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democratic candidate for President in 2004, went so far as to call Lugar’s defeat Tuesday a “tragedy.” President Obama, who served with Lugar during his four years (2005-2008) as Senator from Illinois, issued a statement praising the Indiana Senator for his bipartisan approach to problem solving.

“While Dick and I didn’t always agree on everything,” Obama said, “I found during my time in the Senate that he was often willing to reach across the aisle and get things done.” Even his victorious opponent expressed sympathy for Lugar, a fixture in Indiana and national Republican politics since winning election as Mayor of Indianapolis in 1967 at age 35.



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“I know what it’s like to lose — it’s not fun,” Mourdock, who ran three times unsuccessfully for the U.S. House, told the Associated Press. “And especially after he’s given that 36 years in the Senate. I know he has to feel terrible tonight, and I truly feel badly for him.”

But Mourdock’s supporters celebrated the vote as a signal that it is time to adopt a more confrontational stance against the policies and appointments of Democratic President Barack Obama, who is himself in what may be a tough battle for reelection in a year when a sluggish economy and a stubbornly high unemployment rate may make for tough sledding for both the President and congressional Democrats. Criticisms of Lugar have included complaints over his support of Obama’s two nominees to the Supreme Court (Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan), the Dream Act to give illegal aliens a path to citizenship, the bailout of financial institutions, and Obama’s efforts on nuclear arms control.

But the main message from the Indiana primary is about economic growth, government regulations, and deficit spending, said Chris Chocola, president of the pro-free market Club for Growth, one of many Washington-based conservative organizations backing Mourdock. “Richard Mourdock’s victory truly sends a message to the liberals in the Republican Party,” Chocola [told the New York Times](#). “Voters are rejecting the policies that led to record debt and diminished economic freedom.”

Some Republicans may have been getting that message even before Tuesday’s primary. Olympia Snowe of Maine, a “moderate” Republican whose vote helped the President get the “ObamaCare” health insurance bill through the Senate in 2010, announced earlier this year that she would not run for reelection, citing increased polarization in the Senate as the main reason. Republicans hope to win control of the Senate this year, as more seats currently held by the Democrats are up for election than those held by Republicans. Two Democratic incumbents, Kent Conrad of North Dakota and Jim Webb of Virginia, have said they will not seek reelection, and Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Jon Tester of Montana are among Democrats expected to face tough competition from Republican challengers.

On the other hand, Democrats now view the seat Lugar has held with little competition for 36 years as suddenly up for grabs, since Mourdock has yet to show he can establish anything like the rapport with Independent and Democratic voters that Lugar has long enjoyed. The Democrats are pinning their hopes on U.S. Rep Joe Donnelly of Granger, who they expect will fare better than Mourdock with swing voters. Dan Parker, chairman of the state Democratic Party, was quick to claim Mourdock’s Tea Party support is evidence that the Republican candidate is outside the political mainstream.

“Hoosiers deserve real leadership that will reach across the aisle in Richard Lugar’s successor, not Richard Mourdock’s Tea Party extremism,” Parker said. Mourdock was backed by several other conservative groups, including the National Rifle Association and Freedom Works, an organization that helped build the Tea Party movement. Reports of millions of dollars in contributions by out-of-state political action committees to the Mourdock campaign were noted by Lugar, who complained that the Indiana primary had become a political “playground” for outside interest groups.

Ironically, the former Indianapolis mayor and the state’s senior Senator became cast as an outside influence himself when his residence became an issue. In order to vote in his own election, Lugar this year claimed a farm his family has owned for years as his legal residence. He sold his Indianapolis home in 1977 and has been living in the affluent D.C. suburb of McLean, Virginia, a fact contributing to the perception that the six-term Senator has been in Washington too long and has become out of touch with the people who had sent him there.



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Mourdock, 60, is a former geologist who, despite being a new face on the national scene, is no newcomer to Indiana politics. He ran for the U.S. House in 1988, 1990, and 1992. He lost his bid for the party's nomination for Secretary of State in 2002 and lost again in a race for Vanderburgh County Council in 2004. His persistence paid off when he won election to the County Commission in 1994 and 1998, and he won his current job as state Treasurer in 2006. He was reelected Treasurer in 2010. He is also known for his unsuccessful efforts to block the federal bailout of the auto industry.

His victory Tuesday is a tribute not only to his own tenacity, but is also an indication of the continued impact of the Tea Party movement, which emerged as a powerful conservative force in American politics in January 2010 with the upset victory of Republican Scott Brown over the heavily favored Democrat, state Attorney General Martha Coakley, in the Massachusetts special election to fill the Senate seat left vacant by the death of Edward M. Kennedy. Later that same year, Tea Party favorite Mike Lee defeated five-term Senator Bob Bennett at the Republican state convention in Utah and went on to win the general election. Gov. Charles Crist was driven out of the U.S. Senate primary in Florida in 2010, due in large part to Tea Party support for Marco Rubio, now the junior Senator from Florida and someone often mentioned as a potential running mate for presumptive GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

Mourdock, whose pastimes include riding motorcycles, running marathons, and reading history, appealed to Tea Party activists and other conservatives by preaching a strict fiscal conservatism that leaves little room for compromise. While Lugar has long been praised for his bipartisan approach, Mourdock has said bipartisan compromises are what have led the nation to the brink of bankruptcy. "This is a historic time," [he said](#), "and the most powerful people in both parties are so opposed to one another that one side simply has to win out over the other."

"We are experiencing deep political divisions in our society right now," Lugar acknowledged during a concession speech in which he said he hoped Mourdock would prevail against his Democratic opponent in the fall election. "I believe that people of good will regardless of party can work together for the benefit of our country," he said. But in a written statement distributed afterward, Lugar called Mourdock's "embrace of an unrelenting partisan mindset" incompatible with his own governing philosophy. "Unless he modifies his approach, he will achieve little as a legislator," Lugar said.

Photo of Richard Mourdock & Richard Lugar: AP Images



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