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Alabama Democrats hope Jones' win propels party



Doug Jones supporters celebrate as it's announced that the Democrat won Alabama's special Senate election Tuesday. Jones defeated Republican candidate Roy Moore to become the first Democratic candidate to win election to the U.S. Senate from Alabama since the 1990s. (Kirsten Fiscus/The Anniston Star)

By Kirsten Fiscus, Star Staff Writer, kfiscus@annistonstar.com 13 hrs ago

BIRMINGHAM — As Doug Jones pulled ahead in the Senate election over Republican candidate Roy Moore Tuesday evening, the scene at the Democratic candidate's election party was infectious.

As the margin widened and major news organizations declared Jones the victor, his supporters screamed, embraced, kissed, laughed, and danced.

"Alabama did it. This is a new Alabama," one supporter yelled.

Many hope for a new state Democratic Party, as well.

Democratic officials and voters at the local and state level believe they can harness the energy from Jones' win and carry it into future elections, they said Tuesday. The party could use that energy. No Democrat had won a statewide election in more than a decade, and the party often struggles to field candidates in local races for school boards, county commissions and legislative seats.

"I couldn't vote in this election but I am so excited to see what we can do in the next," Connor Welch, a 17-year-old Shelby County resident, said Tuesday evening at the Doug Jones' election party in Birmingham.

Despite being too young to vote, Welch was very active in the Jones campaign making phone calls, answering phones and canvassing, he said. Welch, however, said he recognized that there is "an electricity running through the party" but said Democrats need to be careful to hold onto it past the election.

"Going forward I think the party, especially in the state, needs more charismatic leaders," he said. "There also needs to be a bridge between the older Democrats and the younger Democrats in the state. There needs to be an emphasis on developing county parties."

Alabama's Democrats will get a test soon. The state will select a complete slate of constitutional officers, including a governor, and a new Legislature, in 2018. Local races will fill ballots around the state, as well.

Sheila Gilbert, chairwoman of the Calhoun County Democratic Party, said working closely with the Jones campaign has boosted the participation across the county.

"They've found people in Calhoun County we've never seen before," Gilbert said earlier Tuesday. "This election had caused people to become active or interested."

Gilbert said she's seen a renewal within the county party.

"It's been rejuvenated, new focus, new direction. We've got some new life," she said.

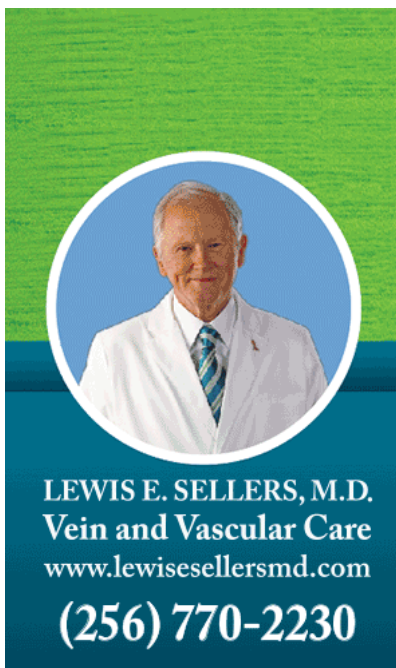
Countywide, Gilbert said she expects to see some strong candidates for future elections.

"People have begun to see there is something here for them," she said. "They're seeing that they might be able to do this."

With the momentum, though, Gilbert said she expected to see some familiar faces, active in the Calhoun County party for a long time, step back.

"They've done about as much as they think they can do," she said. "Some of the older ones will jump on the train and go with us, but some will say they've done all they can do. I think they're just tired. They've known a lot of defeat."

Pollster Zac McCrary, a partner in a Democratic-leaning Montgomery firm, however, says the structure of the Democratic party in Alabama "is dormant at best."



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"It's not terribly relevant," he said. "I'm not sure, whatever happens in the elections, that will change tonight."

McCrary called the energy around the Jones campaign organic but doubted that would continue “a month or even a year from now.”

“There are some structural and some leadership issues that need to be addressed,” he said. “I think Doug Jones, running a good campaign, which he’s done, could motivate candidates to run. A good one in the right place and right time, is a possibility.”

At the state level, officials are also seeing a surge of participation as a result of the election, Nancy Worley, chairwoman of the Alabama Democratic Party, said Tuesday evening.

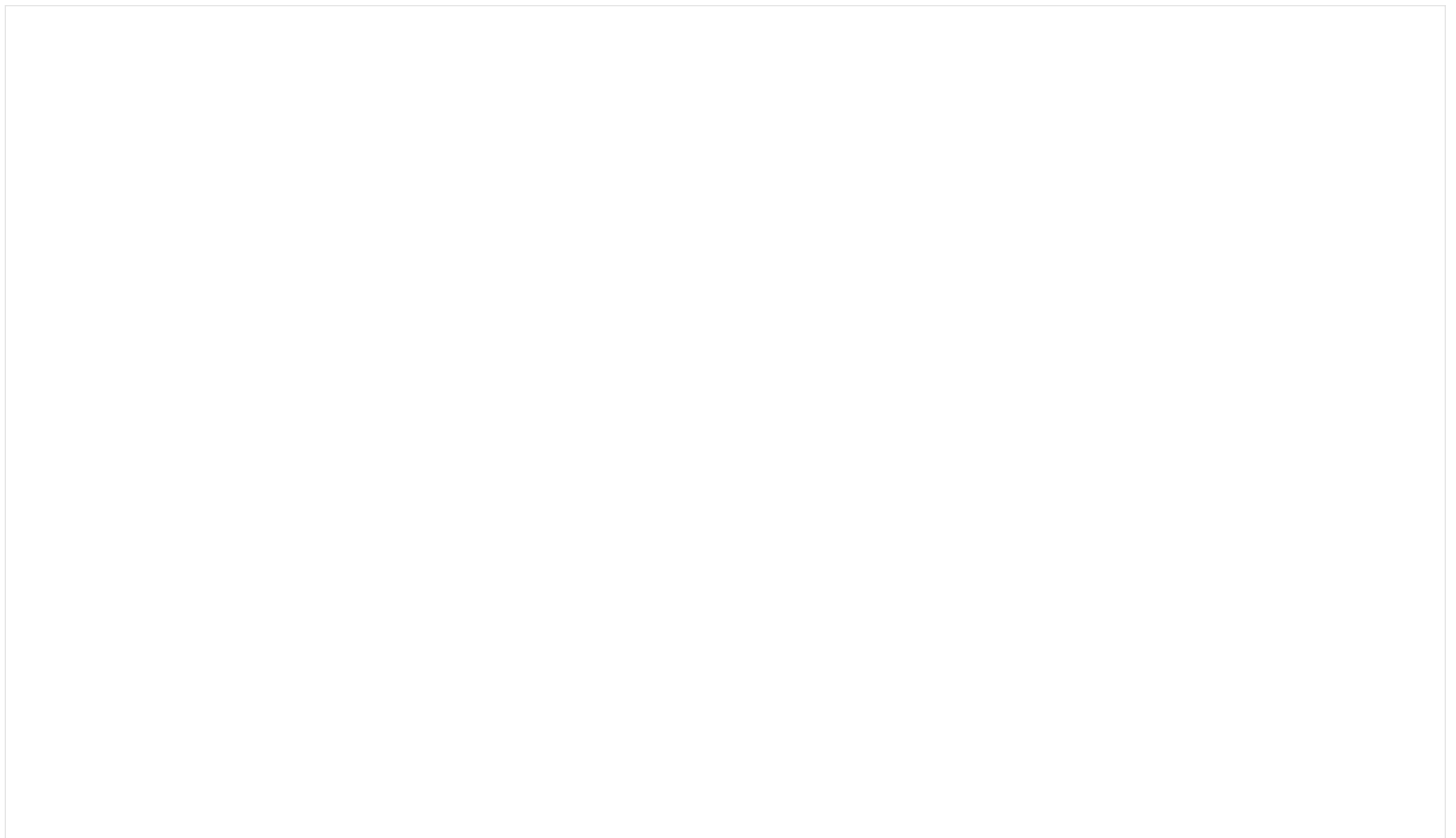
“I think there are a lot of new voters within the party,” Worley said. “I think people have been focused on his message which has been targeted to the vast majority of Alabama people, the working middle class.”

Worley said this election brought a needed revival to the party.

“This race has demonstrated a Democrat can promote himself or herself with a strong progressive message,” she said. “It’s shown us democrats do not need to hide from their values.”

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Strong turnout in election that sends Jones to Senate

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