

U.S.

# Mississippi Governor's Race Hinges on State's Economy

GOP candidate says outlook is improving; Democrat says state is losing businesses and people



Democratic Attorney General Jim Hood, left, and Republican Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves squared off in a televised debate Oct. 14 in Columbus, Miss. PHOTO: ROGELIO V. SOLIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Cameron McWhirter*

Oct. 23, 2019 7:00 am ET

A contentious governor's race in Mississippi is being largely framed around one topic: the state's economy.

Republican candidate Tate Reeves says the economy is rebounding, with the outlook for jobs improving. His opponent, Democrat Jim Hood, says the state is losing businesses and people.

The two men are battling in what likely will be the closest race for governor in years in deeply conservative Mississippi, where Republicans dominate and President Trump is popular. The election is Nov. 5.

"Our economy continues to do very well," said Mr. Reeves, the state's 45-year-old lieutenant governor. "That's a direct result of conservative policies."

Mr. Hood, 57, the state's longtime attorney general, rejects Mr. Reeves' positive view. "If we don't change what we're doing, our kids won't catch up for the rest of the next century," he said.

---

#### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

---

*Do you think Mississippi will turn blue for the right candidate? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.*

---

While most southern states rebounded strongly after the recession, Mississippi's growth has been tepid. The state's population of about three million rose 0.6% from 2010 to 2018, compared with an increase of 6.7% in neighboring Tennessee, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Mississippi's unemployment rate was 5.2% in August, which is low for the state but higher than nearby states' and the national rate in September of 3.5%.

The percentage of people living in poverty in Mississippi was almost 20% in 2018, higher than the percentage in all surrounding states and the national percentage of nearly 12%, according to the census.

The largely rural state has struggled to diversify its economy in recent decades, despite business tax incentives and other efforts. It succeeded in luring some auto companies, with Nissan Motor Co. Ltd. opening a plant in Canton in 2003, and Toyota Motor Corp. opening one in Blue Springs in 2011. A Continental AG tire plant opened this month in Clinton.

The Democratic candidate faces an uphill fight in a state with a GOP-controlled legislature and where no Democrat has won the governor's seat since 1999. Mr. Trump, who has drawn large crowds of supporters in the state, endorsed Mr. Reeves and plans to hold a rally for him Nov. 1 in Tupelo. Mr. Reeves is endorsed by outgoing Gov. Phil Bryant, who is term-limited, and backed by the GOP's powerful state political operation.

But Mr. Hood, 57, a rare Democrat holding statewide office in the Deep South, has been attorney general since 2004. He plays down party affiliation and stresses his rural Mississippi ties on the campaign trail. His advertisements feature him driving a truck, and his website pictures him with a hunting rifle. He told The Wall Street Journal he is pro-Second Amendment and antiabortion.

---

#### RELATED CONTENT

---

- [Republicans Seek to Nationalize Their Local Races \(Aug. 6\)](#)

The contest has been nasty, including allegations that Mr. Reeves arranged for a proposed state road from a shopping area to the subdivision where he lives. Mr. Hood's office investigated, and this fall he issued a report that led to no criminal charges. Mr. Hood said he

planned to turn over his report to the next attorney general, and he has mentioned the allegations during the campaign.

Echoing Mr. Trump's campaign slogan "drain the swamp," Mr. Hood said of Mr. Reeves, "He is the swamp."

Mr. Reeves said his opponent used "the power of his investigators to try to investigate his political opponents," calling the allegations "a false story."

Mr. Hood remains the underdog, but if turnout is high among African-American voters and white Democrats, he has a good chance, said Conor Dowling, associate professor of political science at the University of Mississippi at Oxford. "I would expect it to be closer than it has been for 20 years," Mr. Dowling said.

In the closing weeks of the race, the state's economy has become a focus for both campaigns. Mr. Hood backs Medicaid expansion, which he says will bring in billions of dollars in federal aid and boost jobs in rural hospitals. Mr. Reeves says an expansion would require state matching funds, costing Mississippi hundreds of millions.

Dolly Marascalco, a pharmacy owner in Grenada, Miss., and a Reeves supporter, said the state wasn't doing as well as others but was moving forward. Not expanding government programs was essential to achieving more growth, she said.

"Tate is a fine believer in spending what you have and not overspending," she said.

Anna McInarnay, an elementary teacher in southeast Mississippi, said she backed Mr. Hood because he would work on increasing teacher salaries to improve retention and education. A better-educated workforce would bring more businesses to the state, she said.

Ms. McInarnay, a self-described liberal, said GOP efforts to portray Mr. Hood as a tax-and-spend liberal weren't accurate.

"Our choices are between a conservative and a somewhat conservative," she said.

**Write to Cameron McWhirter at [cameron.mcwhirter@wsj.com](mailto:cameron.mcwhirter@wsj.com)**