

THE CARTER CAMPAIGN IN
TENNESSEE 1980

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Jimmy Carter was President of the United States, and was running for re-election on the Democratic ticket in the 1980 Presidential election. Four years earlier, Carter had captured an overwhelming majority in Tennessee and defeated Republican President Gerald R. Ford by 200,000 votes. In 1976 the fourth congressional district in Tennessee gave Carter the largest majority of any congressional district in the country.

Yet, on November 4, 1980, Jimmy Carter was defeated in his try for Tennessee's 10 electoral votes and in his bid for a second term in the White House, by Republican nominee Ronald Reagan.

President Carter was defeated by only 5,576 votes; however, such an overwhelming victory in 1976 should not have turned into defeat in 1980, especially in a state which the Democratic National Committee had targeted to win, no matter how small the margin.

At first glance, there appears to have been a complete and total breakdown of the Democratic Machine, which for so many years had controlled Tennessee State Politics. This however, could not have been the case. For even with a Republican Governor and a well financed and concentrated effort to wrench control of the state legislature from the Democratic Party, the Republicans were able to gain only

one seat in the State House of Representatives and none in the State Senate. Clearly the old party machine was still intact.

What then were the factors which led to Jimmy Carter's defeat in Tennessee in the 1980 Presidential election?

This paper will attempt to provide an analysis of these factors. In order to explore these liabilities, however, the author will first discuss the strategy which the Carter campaign employed in Tennessee. It must be understood that the author of this paper was actively involved in the Carter campaign and, therefore, was not unbiased. This paper was written from a campaign worker's point of view, and every attempt will be made here to discuss matters which deal with that campaign in Tennessee.

Campaigning Strategy

The Carter campaign used the same strategy which Tennessee Democrats had been using in state elections for years.¹ This was, in effect, a four step process:

- 1) An attempt was made to cut losses in upper East Tennessee, in what is now the first and second congressional districts, and traditionally Republican area.

In order to achieve this, the Democratic campaign forces assigned a chairman to both districts and tried to build a county level organization in each county in the districts. Also, President Carter made one campaign stop in the area.

- 2) A concentrated effort was made to build a large lead in Middle Tennessee, especially in the fourth congressional district with its large percentage of Democratic voters, and in Hamilton and Davidson counties with their large black populations.

This area was the key to the whole campaign, which started very early in Middle Tennessee. Even before the nomination was secure, Rosalyn Carter had made a campaign stop in Murfreesboro, the largest city in the fourth Congressional district.

During the general election campaign, Middle Tennessee was bombarded by political celebrities: Chip Carter made a stop in Nashville to open the campaign headquarters: Jim Sasser and Ned Ray McWherter took a two day bus tour of the fourth Congressional district to promote the President, Joan Mondale spent one day campaigning in the area, and the President himself came to Nashville for one of his famous town "meetings."

- 3) The Democrats tried to cut their losses in rural West Tennessee where pockets of Republican voters could cut into the Middle Tennessee lead, especially in Madison and east Shelby counties, and win by a large margin in downtown Memphis.

In order to accomplish this, traditional Democratic voters were called upon. Counties with histories of large Democratic turnouts were targeted for extra effort. Blacks in Memphis were relied on heavily.

- 4) A huge voter registration drive was conducted, since a large voter turnout generally helps a Democratic candidate.

This was potentially dangerous. There was the possibility that by registering liberal voters, who would traditionally vote for the Democratic candidate, the drive would actually register Anderson votes.

Campaign Liabilities

There was a vital flaw in this strategy, even though it had worked well in the past in gubernatorial and other state elections. When, however, employed in Presidential elections in Tennessee, the Democrats have met with more than a little disappointment. Tennessee has given its electoral votes to only two Democrats in the last seven elections.

This is possibly due to the different make-up of a Presidential campaign. In a state election, the candidate is always available--he will be at every "watermelon cutting" in every county in the state. Throughout the election, the statewide candidate is a familiar person, or can become one.

In a Presidential election, the candidate is more or less insulated from the voters. Because of the massive territory in which he must campaign, he cannot become as familiar a person as the statewide candidate can.

Of course this was as true for the Reagan campaign as the Carter campaign, but with official duties of the Presidency and pressures of the office upon him, President Carter may have seemed more distant than Reagan.

A second liability of the Carter campaign in Tennessee was the makeup of the Tennessee staff. With the exception of Jim Hall, Carter's campaign coordinator, the campaign

was made up of people from out-of-state. The campaign manager and deputy campaign manager were both brought into Tennessee, just to run the campaign.

This caused some resentment among Democrats who, in the past, had taken a large part in running the campaign. The managers were not familiar with the people of Tennessee and, according to some campaign volunteers, did not seem to care about the people. Some felt that the managers may have been great in Washington, but were lousy as Tennessee campaign managers.

In the words of one worker, "they don't know anything about the people in Tracy City--how can they make a decision to influence their votes?" Another said, "they just don't care about the people around here--they just want to play hardball with the boys from Washington."

Probably the greatest single liability of the Carter campaign was the disappointment which the people of the United States and Tennessee felt with the dismal record of the Carter administration. Tennessee had given their full trust to Jimmy Carter in 1976 and the majority of voters seemed to feel that he had let them down.

Summing It Up: Why Carter Lost

According to a poll taken by the New York Times and CBS News on election day, the overwhelming reason that voters gave their vote to Reagan was the need for change.

David Fox, press secretary for the Carter campaign in Tennessee, stated that "it was the economy, the hostages, the debate, everything. You could tell from the way Carter looked at Reagan (in the debate) that he did not like him and that did not go over very well."²

Senator Jim Sasser of Tennessee said, "I think the events of the last week of the campaign played a part in shifting votes to Reagan."³

Bill Brock, GOP national chairman, agreed that the electorate was voting for a change. Brock said, "I think that the voters have decided that we need a lot of new faces in politics."⁴

Perhaps the reason for the Carter loss was best summed up by a Bill Boner staff member on election night: "We made a mistake by assuming that Tennessee is different than the rest of the country, and really the people here are affected by the same things which effect the people all over the country."

And that was the case. The dissatisfaction which was felt by the country with the Carter administration, according to most polls, was also felt in Tennessee. Because it was, the Republicans were able to capitalize on the dissatisfaction to win a narrow victory over Jimmy Carter in Tennessee, a state which gave him overwhelming support only four years earlier.

NOTES

Mike Williams is a major in Economics at Middle Tennessee State University.

¹From conversations with Congressional District coordinators. The Republican strategy was exactly opposite--beat Carter in East Tennessee, hold the line in Middle and win a narrow victory in West Tennessee, according to the Nashville Tennessean in its post-election coverage.

²From the Nashville Tennessean, November 5, 1980.

³From the Nashville Tennessean, November 5, 1980. Sasser was talking about not only the renewed talk of the Iranian hostage crisis, but in Tennessee, former Democratic Governor Ray Blanton was indicted. This could have brought out some "anti-Democratic" votes.

⁴From the Nashville Tennessean, November 5, 1980.